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THE UNATTAINABLE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE UNKNOWN
THE CIRCLE
THE EXPLORER
JACK STRAW
LADY FREDERICK
LANDED GENTRY
THE TENTH MAN
A MAN OF HONOUR
MRS. DOT
PENELOPE
SMITH
THE LAND OF PROMISE
HOME AND BEAUTY
OUR BETTERS

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD

THE UNATTAINABLE

A FARCE IN THREE ACTS

BY
W. S. MAUGHAM



LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD.

■

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This play, under the title *Caroline*, was produced at the New Theatre on February 8, 1916, with the following cast :

CAROLINE ASHLEY	...	...	Irene Vanbrugh.
MAUDE FULTON...	...	...	Lillah McCarthy.
ISABELLA TRENCH	...	...	Nina Sevensing.
COOPER ...	...	...	Florence Lloyd.
ROBERT OLDHAM	...	...	Leonard Boyne.
DR. CORNISH ...	...	...	Dion Boucicault.
REX CUNNINGHAM	...	...	Martin Lewis.

.

CHARACTERS

CAROLINE ASHLEY.

ISABELLA TRENCH.

MAUDE FULTON.

COOPER.

ROBERT OLDHAM.

REX CUNNINGHAM.

DR. CORNISH.

The action takes place during the morning and afternoon of one day in the drawing-room of Caroline's house in Regent's Park.

THE UNATTAINABLE

ACT I

SCENE: *The drawing-room of CAROLINE'S house in Regent's Park. It is spacious and airy. It is furnished in a pleasantly fantastic manner by a woman who desires to be in the latest mode, but who tempers it with her own good taste. The influence of futurism is apparent in the carpet, the cushions, the coverings of sofas and chairs; but there is nothing so outrageous as to make the room merely a curiosity. Here and there large jars of flowers contrast the sobriety of nature with the extravagance of human imagination.*

It is early summer and late in the morning.

COOPER, a trim parlourmaid, ushers in MRS. TRENCH. ISABELLA TRENCH is a woman of thirty-five, fair, plump, pretty still, well dressed, and debonaire. She has an attractive softness and a great gift of sympathy. Her heart melts to every unhappiness, and people in distress go to her instinctively.

COOPER.

I'll tell Mrs. Ashley you're here, madam.

ISABELLA.

She's not down yet?

COOPER.

No, madam, she's only just had her bath.

ISABELLA.

Do ask her if I can come up. I want to see her at once.

COOPER.

Very good, madam.

ISABELLA.

Tell her I'm frightfully excited.

COOPER.

Very good, madam.

ISABELLA.

[*With a smile.*] Of course you know, Cooper?

COOPER.

Oh, yes, madam; it was cook saw it first. She always likes to have a look at *The Times* before it goes upstairs.

ISABELLA.

Was Mrs. Ashley surprised?

COOPER.

Well, madam, she never said a word. She just kept staring at the announcement. As I said to cook, I really thought her eyes would pop out of her head.

ISABELLA.

I must see her at once, Cooper.

COOPER.

I'll go and tell her, madam. [*As she is going the telephone bell rings. COOPER answers it.*] Yes—who is it, please? No, miss, this is Mrs. Ashley's maid speaking. [*To ISABELLA.*] It's Miss Fulton, madam.

ISABELLA.

Oh, let me speak to her. I think I know what she wants. Go and tell Mrs. Ashley I'm here.

COOPER.

Very good, madam.

[*Exit. ISABELLA sits down and takes the receiver.*]

ISABELLA.

Maude, Maude! It's Isabella Trench speaking. I rang you up this morning, and they said you hadn't come up from the country. I have not seen Caroline yet. I know no more than you do, darling. I think it must be true. After all, it's in *The Times*. Why don't you come round? I'm sure Caroline will want to see you. Yes, that's it. You'll find me here. Good-bye.

[*She puts down the receiver. COOPER ushers in REX CUNNINGHAM. He is a nice-looking young man with dark eyes, and dark hair brushed back over his head and plastered down. He achieves a romantic look, notwithstanding his motor-coat and the cap that he carries in his hand.*]

THE UNATTAINABLE

COOPER.

Mr. Cunningham.

[**REX** hesitates a moment as he sees a stranger in the room, then recognizes **ISABELLA** and comes forward cordially. **ISABELLA** greets him without warmth.]

REX.

How do you do?

COOPER.

Mrs. Ashley will be down directly, madam.

ISABELLA.

Very well.

[*Exit COOPER.*]**REX.**

[*Looking at his wrist watch.*] She promised she'd be ready on the minute.

ISABELLA.

What for?

REX.

I've got a new two-seater. I'm going to take her for a turn round Richmond Park.

ISABELLA.

When did you make that arrangement?

REX.

Last night.

[*She looks at him for a moment puzzled.*]

ISABELLA.

Haven't you heard the news?

REX.

What news?

ISABELLA.

Why, there's an announcement in *The Times* this morning of Stephen Ashley's death.

REX.

My hat! . . . Ought one to condole with Caroline or congratulate her?

ISABELLA.

I didn't know you called her Caroline.

REX.

Didn't you?

ISABELLA.

She hasn't seen her husband for over ten years. One can hardly expect her to be very much upset. Still, I don't think she'll want to go for a run in your two-seater.

REX.

Why not?

ISABELLA.

She'll have other things to do.

REX.

Was her husband an awful brute?

ISABELLA.

I don't know anything about him. Caroline never discusses her relations with him. I don't believe there's one of her friends who's ever seen him even.

REX.

I asked her once if he was cruel to her. She said no, he had adenoids.

ISABELLA.

You seem to be on very intimate terms with Caroline.

REX.

Do you disapprove?

ISABELLA.

Very much.

REX.

What shall we do about it?

ISABELLA.

D'you know that Robert Oldham and Caroline have been madly in love with one another for the last ten years? It has given me a new faith in human nature to watch their charming affection for one another. They've waited all this time, and now at last Caroline is free. I'm so glad to think they have nothing to reproach themselves with. It's the happy ending to a fairy story.

REX.

[*Dejectedly.*] I suppose you think the only thing I can do is to take myself off.

ISABELLA.

Robert may be here any minute.

REX.

I was looking forward enormously to our drive.

ISABELLA.

Are you in love with Caroline?

REX.

Desperately.

ISABELLA.

[*Putting her hand on his arm.*] I'm so sorry. You must try and get over it.

REX.

I shall never do that.

ISABELLA.

But you knew about Robert.

REX.

He's forty-five if he's a day. No man can be seriously in love at that age.

ISABELLA.

Caroline oughtn't to have let you come here. She must have known that you cared for her.

REX.

She told me she was in love with Robert Oldham.

ISABELLA.

[*More and more sympathetic.*] Are you awfully unhappy?

REX.

Awfully. Do you think there's no chance for me at all?

ISABELLA.

It would be cruel to hold out any hopes to you. None—none whatever.

REX.

My hat!

ISABELLA.

Now you must go.

REX.

All right. If you think I'd better. You've been awfully kind to me.

ISABELLA.

I've got such a soft heart and you've touched it.

REX.

May I call you Isabella?

ISABELLA.

I'd like you to.

[*She gives him her hand. He raises it to his lips and kisses it.*]

ISABELLA.

I'm such a sentimentalist. Love always moves me.

REX.

Good-bye.

[*Exit.* ISABELLA *wipes the tiny tears that glisten in the corner of her eyes.* CAROLINE *comes in.* *She is a very attractive woman of thirty-five, tall, slim, with humorous eyes and a charming smile. She is dressed for motoring.*]

ISABELLA.

Caroline!

CAROLINE.

Have I kept you waiting?

ISABELLA.

Why didn't you let me come up? I wanted to see you so badly.

CAROLINE.

I don't let even my dearest friend see me till I've done my hair.

ISABELLA.

I suppose you don't like your forehead?

CAROLINE.

Not much. By the way, where is Rex? I saw his car from my window.

ISABELLA.

I thought you wouldn't want to see him this morning. I sent him away.

CAROLINE.

Why on earth did you do that?

ISABELLA.

My dear, do you know he's in love with you?

CAROLINE.

I should be a perfect fool if I didn't.

ISABELLA.

He hasn't told you so?

CAROLINE.

I'm beginning to think it's his only topic of conversation.

ISABELLA.

My dear, how can you be so flippant?

CAROLINE.

D'you think I ought to take him seriously?

ISABELLA.

[*Not without acidity.*] Of course, he's very young, I don't suppose he means half he says.

CAROLINE.

[*Chaffing her.*] Even if he means a quarter it's a good deal.

ISABELLA.

D'you think he wants to marry you?

CAROLINE.

I don't know. I'm sure he wants to elope with me.

ISABELLA.

You're too exasperating, Caroline. But I didn't come here to talk about Rex.

CAROLINE.

D'you call him Rex?

ISABELLA.

He asked me to just now.

CAROLINE.

[Smiling.] Oh!

ISABELLA.

Now, Caroline, be serious. *Is it true?* When I read the births, deaths, and marriages in *The Times* this morning, and suddenly saw your name, I could hardly believe my eyes.

CAROLINE.

Neither could I. "On the 29th ult., at the Edward and Alexandra Hospital, Nairobi, Stephen, only son of the late Algernon Ashley of Bleane Woods, Faversham, aged 41. By Cable."

ISABELLA.

It must be true.

CAROLINE.

Of course, it's very circumstantial, but Stephen had a peculiar sense of humour. He's been reported dead two or three times. It's true, it's never got so far as the obituary column of *The Times* before.

ISABELLA.

Can't you make certain?

CAROLINE.

I telephoned to my solicitors and they've cabled to Nairobi. Somehow I think it is true this time.

ISABELLA.

Shall you go into mourning?

CAROLINE.

I don't see why I should.

ISABELLA.

I wouldn't unless you think it'll become you.

CAROLINE.

After all, I haven't seen or heard of my husband for more than ten years. It would be hypocrisy to pretend that I regret his death.

ISABELLA.

I never knew exactly why you separated from him.

CAROLINE.

Oh, he had adenoids.

ISABELLA.

[*Smiling.*] You are the most reserved person I ever met.

CAROLINE.

I managed not to discuss his failings while he was alive. I think I may just as well hold my tongue about them now he's dead.

ISABELLA.

Ah, well, whatever you suffered it's all over now. You've only got happiness to look forward to. Oh, my dear, marry Robert quickly. Don't let there be any delays. Heaven knows you've waited long enough.

CAROLINE.

Ten years.

ISABELLA.

Aren't you glad now that you have nothing to reproach yourselves with? I know, I'm very glad for you.

CAROLINE.

There was never any possibility of anything else. Of course, we might have bolted, but Robert has practised too long in the Divorce Court to fancy the rôle of co-respondent. Besides, he had nothing but his practice to live upon. And we were too fond of one another to risk the infinite tediousness of an affair.

ISABELLA.

Everyone must admire your strength.

CAROLINE.

It didn't require strength, only common sense.

ISABELLA.

Have you heard from him this morning?

CAROLINE.

No, I knew he had to be in chambers early.

ISABELLA.

He's certain to come round presently.

CAROLINE.

I shouldn't think so. He's in a case that's first on the list.

ISABELLA.

Aren't you excited? I wonder how you can bear your impatience.

CAROLINE.

I can hardly expect Robert to throw up a case to come and propose to me, can I?

[COOPER enters to announce MAUDE FULTON.
She is a smartly-dressed spinster not far off forty, with bright eyes and a vivacious manner, but without good looks. She has a sharp tongue. She is sentimental when other people are concerned, but exceedingly practical in her own affairs.]

COOPER.

Miss Fulton.

[Exit.]

MAUDE.

Oh, my dear, I've had a success. I've been followed in the street.

CAROLINE.

[*Amused, greeting her.*] Maude!

MAUDE.

I was rushing along here, when suddenly I realized that a man was following me. Well, I wanted to make sure, so I crossed to the other side of the street, and he crossed too. I slackened down. . . . I was simply running along, I was so anxious to see you and dear Robert—and *he* slackened down.

ISABELLA.

Weren't you frightened?

MAUDE.

Frightened? Of course not. I'm constantly being followed in the street. I like it. It gives an amusement to the dullest walk. Of course, it never goes any further.

CAROLINE.

Do you say that with relief or with regret?

MAUDE.

Oh, my dear, I should never have a moment to myself if I listened to all the men who want to make love to me. Of course, I cannot make out what it is they see in me. I know I'm not beautiful, but there's evidently something about me that they can't resist.

CAROLINE.

[*Chaffing her.*] I expect it is that you throw yourself at their heads. I never knew a man yet who could resist that.

MAUDE.

Oh, my dear, I quite forgot. My best congratulations.

CAROLINE.

On the death of my husband?

MAUDE.

And on your engagement to Robert Oldham.

CAROLINE.

It's very kind of you, but I'm not engaged to Robert Oldham.

MAUDE.

Oh, nonsense; that follows automatically on the death of your husband, like putting a penny in the slot and getting a piece of chocolate out. I suppose he's running along to Somerset House now to get a special licence.

CAROLINE.

My dear, don't be ridiculous. He hasn't asked me to marry him.

ISABELLA.

But he's going to.

CAROLINE.

[*Thoughtfully.*] I suppose he is.

MAUDE.

What on earth d'you mean, Caroline? You know he is.

CAROLINE.

[*With exasperation*] Yes, of course I do. But don't badger me. You talk as if we had to marry if we liked it or not. I'm not going to force the man to marry me.

MAUDE.

Oh, my dear, don't talk such nonsense. He's been passionately in love with you for years.

CAROLINE.

For years!

ISABELLA.

And you've been just as much in love with him, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

I know I have.

MAUDE.

You've both been looking forward to this moment ever since you met one another?

CAROLINE.

And now it's come.

ISABELLA.

What a funny thing to say, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

It's the obvious thing to say, isn't it? I'm getting into training for married life.

ISABELLA.

How strange you are this morning. I expected to find you, oh, I scarcely know—tremulous, crying a little, perhaps. . . .

CAROLINE.

[*With a smile.*] I suppose you were prepared to mingle your tears with mine.

ISABELLA.

Happy tears. I certainly didn't expect to find you . . .

CAROLINE.

What?

MAUDE.

In a beastly temper, my dear.

ISABELLA.

Be nice to Robert when he comes, Caroline. Think how he must be hating that stupid case which is keeping him away. Don't you know what his thoughts are? I do. He's counting the minutes—why, I can almost hear the beating of his heart.

CAROLINE.

What nonsense you talk, Isabella.

ISABELLA.

Can't you see him, when he gets here at last, ringing the bell? And the time seems interminable till Cooper opens the door. And then he'll run up the stairs four at a time.

CAROLINE.

It's just like a penny novelette, isn't it? But he won't, because it would make him out of breath.

ISABELLA.

As if he'll think of that, you foolish creature. He'll just take you in his arms and say: At last, at last—I see it all.

MAUDE.

I'd love to be here. I adore romance.

CAROLINE.

I shall be greatly obliged if you'll both of you go away before he comes.

ISABELLA.

Of course, darling. There are moments when one has a right to be rid of prying eyes.

MAUDE.

When did he say he was coming?

CAROLINE.

He hasn't said. I've not heard from him this morning.

MAUDE.

D'you mean to say he didn't telephone? I wonder why not.

CAROLINE.

Perhaps he hadn't time to look at the paper. He may not know.

MAUDE.

Oh, nonsense.

ISABELLA.

I think it's very natural he shouldn't have telephoned. After all, Stephen Ashley *was* your husband. Robert is a man of the greatest delicacy. It may easily have occurred to him that just at that moment you might have certain memories that you preferred to be left alone with.

CAROLINE.

How long do you give his delicacy?

MAUDE.

Till the court rises, personally.

ISABELLA.

[*Smiling.*] I believe you're just as impatient as I know he is.

CAROLINE.

My dear, when you've been staying at the seaside, haven't you sometimes gone down to the beach meaning to have a bathe, and when you got there found the sea look very chilly? You try not to notice it. You go into your bathing machine, and it's grey and comfortless. But you take off your clothes and put on your bathing dress, and then you open the door. You see in front of you a narrow bit of sea. And it's cold and yellow and dreary and wet. And your heart sinks.

MAUDE.

The only thing then is not to think about it, but to jump in quickly.

CAROLINE.

I'm wondering if that is what Robert is saying to himself just now.

ISABELLA.

What on earth makes you think that?

CAROLINE.

It's a very good plan to ascribe your own feelings to other people.

MAUDE.

My dear, you don't mean to say you're frightened?

CAROLINE.

[*Desperately.*] Panic-stricken.

ISABELLA.

How foolish you are, Caroline! You don't mean to say you have any doubt about Robert's devotion?

MAUDE.

Oh, is *that* what's troubling you?

ISABELLA.

Why, everyone knows he adores you. Don't you know how he speaks about you to your friends? I remember, last New Year's Eve when we were having supper together at the Savoy, I said to him: Doesn't it make you rather melancholy to think that another year is gone? No, he said, every New Year that comes brings me nearer to marrying Caroline.

CAROLINE.

He's a dear old thing. Of course, I know he loves me.

MAUDE.

We have inspired love, you and I, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

But your adorers don't put a pistol to your head and say: Marry me.

MAUDE.

No, but they frequently put one to their own and say they'll shoot themselves if I don't.

CAROLINE.

You're still a spinster, Maude, how do you meet the situation?

MAUDE.

I tell them the truth. After mature consideration I have come to the conclusion that one husband is not enough for one woman.

CAROLINE.

Good heavens, I found one much more than I wanted.

MAUDE.

That doesn't prove that you might not have found three more satisfactory.

ISABELLA.

Three !

MAUDE.

That is my ideal. I would live two days a week with each and have my Sundays to myself.

[The telephone bell rings.]

ISABELLA.

That is Robert.

CAROLINE.

It can't be. He must be in court just now.

[She goes towards the telephone. It keeps on ringing.]

ISABELLA.

I have a presentiment. I'm convinced it's Robert.

[Just as CAROLINE is about to take the receiver she hesitates ; she is very nervous.]

CAROLINE.

Answer for me, Maude, in case . . .

MAUDE.

Very well.

[*She takes up the receiver and listens.*]

CAROLINE.

I hate telephones. I wish I'd never had one put in.

MAUDE.

Who is that? No. This is Miss Fulton speaking, but I'll call Mrs. Ashley—yes, I'll hold on.

CAROLINE.

Maude, who is it?

MAUDE.

[*Significantly.*] Mr. Oldham's clerk.

CAROLINE.

[*Agitated.*] Maude, say I can't speak to anybody. Say I'm out. Say you don't know when I'll be in.

MAUDE.

[*Into the receiver.*] Is that you, Robert? This is Maude Fulton. Caroline is here. Yes, she'll be delighted to see you.

CAROLINE.

Maude, I'm out. I'm out, I tell you. Say you've made a mistake. Maude, you cat!

MAUDE.

[*Taking no notice.*] Yes, you'd better come round at once. Of course Caroline's disengaged; she's been expecting you.

CAROLINE.

[*Aghast.*] Maude!

MAUDE.

Good-bye. [*She puts down the receiver.*] That settles that.

CAROLINE.

Maude, I'll never forgive you. It's monstrous. You had no right to say all that. I'll never speak to you again as long as I live. You said I'd been expecting him.

MAUDE.

Well, haven't you? And what's more, he knows you've been expecting him. After all these years it really is not worth while for you to play hide-and-seek with one another.

CAROLINE.

It's so humiliating. You've told him almost in so many words that I'm sitting here waiting for him to come and make me a proposal of marriage.

MAUDE.

So you are.

CAROLINE.

Has the possibility occurred to you that I may refuse him?

MAUDE.

[*Decidedly.*] No.

CAROLINE.

Why not ?

MAUDE.

You've let him wait for you year after year. He's given you the best of his life. He's sacrificed everything in the hope of marrying you some day. Now you must marry him if you want to or not.

ISABELLA.

But you do want to, Caroline ?

CAROLINE.

[*Hesitatingly.*] I thought so yesterday.

ISABELLA.

You know he dotes on you. You'll never find anyone who will love you so faithfully.

CAROLINE.

It's loving that's the important thing, not being loved.

MAUDE.

But you love him, Caroline. Don't be so silly. All your friends have known for ten years that you loved him. You're not like me. You're one of those constant women. You've never bothered your head about another man since first you made Robert's acquaintance.

ISABELLA.

Your feelings can't have changed from one day to another.

CAROLINE.

I suppose they can't.

ISABELLA.

You *must* accept him, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

Yes, I know. [*With a smile.*] Don't be afraid. I'm going to. . . . But don't be harsh with me. It can't be very strange that I'm a little nervous. In fact, I distinctly feel my heart beating in my boots.

ISABELLA.

Never mind that. The shyness you're feeling gives you a sort of tremulous charm which, I promise you, is very effective.

CAROLINE.

I must go and put on some other things. It's only fair to Robert to set out the object he's going to purchase to the best advantage.

ISABELLA.

No matter what you wear he'll think you ravishing.

CAROLINE.

Dear Robert. I know. But for all that I will not be proposed to in a motor-coat.

ISABELLA.

You're going to make him very happy.

CAROLINE.

I think I am. I was very foolish just now. I'm beginning to feel more at ease. After all, it is a great pleasure to know that after all his kindness to me, all his unselfish devotion, I have it in my power at last to give him his heart's desire.

[*Exit.*]

MAUDE.

That's that.

ISABELLA.

Poor Caroline !

MAUDE.

Now, will you tell me what is the matter with her.

ISABELLA.

[*With a shrug of shoulders.*] Hope deferred. When you've wanted something very badly and it comes at last, it is somehow a little frightening.

MAUDE.

You're sure there isn't another man somewhere lurking in the background !

ISABELLA.

Oh, quite. Rex Cunningham was here this morning, but she didn't see him. I sent him away.

MAUDE.

Very wise of you.

ISABELLA.

I felt sorry for him. He's desperately in love with her. But I'm sure she isn't even interested in him. She's only known him three months.

MAUDE.

A man you've known three months always has an advantage over a man you've known ten years.

ISABELLA.

Now I know why you never married, Maude.

MAUDE.

Why?

ISABELLA.

Because nobody asked you.

MAUDE.

How did you guess?

ISABELLA.

Because you have common sense. Men like it in a wife, but not in a girl.

MAUDE.

I'm very glad you sent Rex away. When next he comes he'll find everything settled.

[*Enter COOPER, followed by REX.*]

COOPER.

Mr. Cunningham.

[*Exit COOPER. The two ladies are taken aback by his unexpected appearance. He is not a little surprised to find ISABELLA still there.*]

REX.

Oh, I was expecting to find Caroline. [*Shaking hands with* MISS FULTON.] How do you do?

MAUDE.

[*Promptly.*] She'll be down in one moment. You must stay.

REX.

I was going to.

ISABELLA.

I thought you were going for a drive?

REX.

Alone? I just tootled round the Park, and then I made up my mind that I must see Caroline.

MAUDE.

I quite understand. It's nice of you to want to be the first.

REX.

[*Not comprehending.*] I beg your pardon?

MAUDE.

[*Sweetly.*] To congratulate her on her engagement.

REX.

[*With consternation.*] What?

MAUDE.

You don't mean to say you didn't know? She's to be married to Robert Oldham almost directly.

I think it's so charming that these two dear people should come together after all these years. And you know, they're madly in love with one another.

REX.

But they weren't engaged a quarter of an hour ago.

MAUDE.

Oh, that's nothing. I've been frequently engaged and broken it off again within twelve minutes.

REX.

Of course, that's quite comprehensible.

MAUDE.

Do you think so? It isn't true.

REX.

It might be. Anyhow, I'm going to wait till I see Caroline.

MAUDE.

Why?

REX.

Because I'm going to propose to her, if you want to know. [*To ISABELLA.*] I ought never to have let you chivvy me away. It's impossible that she should marry Robert Oldham. It'll break my heart. If you have any kindness you won't try and prevent me from seeing her. I must see her.

MAUDE.

Of course, you must see her. You'll hardly recognize her. She looks ten years younger. She's simply radiant. I've never seen anyone look so happy. How she adores that man! [REX gives a gasp.] They're going to be married by special licence. They've already made up their minds to go to Venice for their honeymoon. Robert had to go away for a few minutes; she could hardly bear to let him out of her sight.

REX.

[*Sinking down crushed.*] My hat! I shall never get over this.

ISABELLA.

[*Going up to him.*] My poor boy! Rex! Rex!

REX.

It's just like my luck. That's the sort of thing that always happens to me.

MAUDE.

I never loved a young gazelle but it was sure to die.

ISABELLA.

Maude! [*To REX compassionately.*] It breaks my heart to see you so wretched.

REX.

Nobody ever cares for me.

ISABELLA.

Don't say that. It sounds so hopeless.

REX.

[*Getting up.*] I'd better go. There's nothing for me to do here now.

ISABELLA.

[*Taking his hand.*] Where are you going?

REX.

I don't know, I don't care.

ISABELLA.

I can't bear to see you like this. . . . Won't you come and dine with me to-night?

REX.

You'll find me very dull.

ISABELLA.

Oh, no, I shan't.

REX.

[*Still holding her hand.*] Very well. You are good to me.

ISABELLA.

Good-bye.

REX.

You have an extraordinary gift of sympathy. There's something about the blueness of your eyes that seems to console one.

ISABELLA.

Dear Rex.

[*He goes out with a bow to MAUDE.*]

MAUDE.

Well, my dear, you're wasting no time.

ISABELLA.

[*Indignantly.*] Maude! The poor boy was absolutely broken up. It made my heart bleed. I couldn't let him go without a word of comfort.

MAUDE.

H'm! Why did you ask him to dinner?

ISABELLA.

I thought he'd like to talk to me about Caroline. I couldn't bear to think of him passing the whole evening by himself. He would have been too wretched.

MAUDE.

Oh, well, with a husband safely tucked away in India you can afford to be a sympathetic friend.

ISABELLA.

What things you said to him! It simply made my hair stand on end.

MAUDE.

Don't you think it was much the best thing to do? Caroline is in a funny mood. There's some-

thing pathetic and rather charming about that young man. I don't deny it for a minute. I've got a heart just as much as you have, my dear. There's no knowing what Caroline might have done in a moment of emotion. It was much better to face him with the accomplished fact.

ISABELLA.

You're a wonderful liar, Maude.

MAUDE.

Don't be idiotic, my dear. To lie well is one of the privileges of our sex. I don't lie any better than you do. Besides, were they lies? I was only anticipating. In half an hour all I said will be true.

ISABELLA.

I don't say you weren't justified.

MAUDE.

And what is half an hour? Just think how time changes from one place to another. Why, Caroline's engagement is already ancient history in Petrograd.

ISABELLA.

Yes, if you look at it like that it's a white lie at the utmost.

MAUDE.

Oh, my dear, not even that. Hardly more than a fib.

[COOPER comes in followed by ROBERT OLDHAM.

ROBERT is a tall handsome man of five and forty, well-preserved, but inclined to stoutness; he is well dressed, well cared for, and evidently desirous to hold on to a semblance of youth.]

COOPER.

Mr. Oldham.

[*Exit.*]

MAUDE.

[*Enthusiastically.*] Robert !

ISABELLA.

[*Sympathetically.*] Dear Robert.

[*ROBERT is a little taken aback at the warmth of his greeting, but he braces himself and advances into the room.*]

ROBERT.

You welcome me as though I'd had a narrow shave of being run over by a motor-bus.

ISABELLA.

We're very glad to see you.

MAUDE.

We've been waiting for you all the morning.

ROBERT.

Oh ! [*With an effort at alacrity.*] I wish I'd known. [*Shakes hands with MAUDE.*] How do you do ?

MAUDE.

I *must* kiss you.

ROBERT.

Must you ?

MAUDE.

[*Drawing back coyly.*] Don't you want me to?

ROBERT.

Of course I do. I'd like it.

[*He offers her his cheek and she kisses him.*]

MAUDE.

Now don't pretend you're as cool as a cucumber. Men are so silly. They're so afraid of their emotions. Of course, you're all in a flutter. Let me feel your pulse.

ROBERT.

I shall not. You're very familiar with me, Maude; I don't like it.

MAUDE.

Dear Robert.

ROBERT.

[*To ISABELLA, taking her hand.*] And how are you dear lady?

[*She leaves her hand in his. It must be a habit of hers.*]

ISABELLA.

[*A little tremulously.*] I hardly know what to say to you. Oh, Robert, I'm so happy in your happiness. Isn't it wonderful? After all these years—it's so stupid of me, I almost feel as if I could cry.

ROBERT.

You have a wonderful heart, Isabella.

ISABELLA.

You know I'm not clever. . . . I can't express myself, but believe me, I feel all that you could wish me to feel.

ROBERT.

You may kiss me if you wish to.

ISABELLA.

[*Laughing.*] I don't.

ROBERT.

A rebuff.

MAUDE.

But how on earth have you managed to get here ?

ROBERT.

By the drastic method of taking a taxi.

MAUDE.

Don't be exasperating. We were under the impression you had a case this morning.

ROBERT.

Who is we ?

MAUDE.

Caroline, Isabella, and myself.

ROBERT.

I see. No ; a case which was expected to finish yesterday has turned out rather a long one. I dare say we shan't come on to-day at all.

MAUDE.

[*Promptly.*] Then why didn't you come earlier?

ROBERT.

It's only midday. I know that Caroline is not an early riser.

MAUDE.

You might have telephoned.

ROBERT.

I had some papers to read. Business before pleasure, you know. . . . Have you been discussing my silence?

ISABELLA.

[*Smiling.*] I think I was right after all. I put it down to delicacy. Any nice man would realize that just at that moment a woman must prefer to be alone with her recollections.

MAUDE.

Anyhow, the important thing is that you're here now. And if I know you at all you've got a ring in your pocket.

[ROBERT gives a slight start.]

ISABELLA.

Oh, Robert, do show it me! I'd love to see it.

ROBERT.

But I haven't got a ring. I went straight to chambers this morning and then I came straight here. It never occurred to me.

MAUDE.

You stupid man! Caroline would have been so pleased.

ISABELLA.

And touched. But never mind; when she sees you she'll think of nothing but that she's free and you're here. And for ever and ever you'll be here. Oh, Robert, be kind to her! Remember all she's gone through. You can never do too much for her.

ROBERT.

I know.

MAUDE.

Have you made up your mind where you're going to spend your honeymoon?

ROBERT.

My dear Maude, it's only a couple of hours ago that I saw the sad news of Stephen Ashley's death.

MAUDE.

Sad, do you call them?

ROBERT.

For him, I mean. Of course, not for me. I don't suppose there's anybody who isn't cared for by someone or other. I expect somebody is regretting him.

MAUDE.

I very much doubt it. I think we may safely look upon his death as a happy release.

ROBERT.

I don't know why you say that. You know nothing about him except that he had adenoids.

ISABELLA.

It's so splendid of Caroline never to have said a single word against him.

ROBERT.

Oh, splendid. But, after all, a man may have adenoids and yet be possessed of all kinds of—admirable qualities.

MAUDE.

You're not going to stand up for him. If Caroline refused to say anything against him, it's certainly not because there was nothing to say.

ROBERT.

Of course not.

MAUDE.

It almost sounded as if you were taking his part.

ROBERT.

Good heavens, don't be so literal. I was making a general observation. That's why conversation is impossible with women. They *will* find a personal application in a general statement. Besides, a man with my particular experience knows that a person may have all manner of virtues and yet be insupportable to live with.

ISABELLA.

Fortunately that isn't the case with Caroline.

ROBERT.

Oh, no ; Caroline is wonderful. Who should know it better than I ?

MAUDE.

Personally, I recommend you to go to Venice.

ROBERT.

[*As though he were just on the verge of starting.*]
Now ?

MAUDE.

For your honeymoon I mean.

ROBERT.

Oh, I beg your pardon ; I'd forgotten for the moment. Can you quite see us gushing up and down the Grand Canal ? I fancy we've known one another a little too long for Venice.

MAUDE.

Oh, but marriage makes such a difference. You'll have to make one another's acquaintance all over again.

ROBERT.

[*Not without anxiety.*] D'you think it'll change Caroline much ? I don't know that I should wish that exactly. You see I'm used to this Caroline.

MAUDE.

She'll be just the same, only more so.

ROBERT.

That is reassuring, but rather vague. My idea would be rather to make a tour of the capitals of Europe.

MAUDE.

But you'd spend all your time in railway stations.

ROBERT.

I know. That is precisely where a man shows his superiority to a woman. She is flustered and nervous. She's certain they'll miss the train. But he is calm. He sees to the luggage nonchalantly. He has the tickets safe. He keeps an eagle eye on the umbrellas. This is a man—every inch of him, she says; I am but a poor weak woman. Believe me, those are very good lines on which to start married life. I think the capitals of Europe.

ISABELLA.

My own impression is that Caroline will want to go to some quiet little place by the seaside.

ROBERT.

I don't look my best in bathing costume.

ISABELLA.

She'll want to be alone with you surely.

ROBERT.

I won't bathe. Nothing will induce me to bathe. I hate cold water. I was only thinking this morning how I hated the sea.

MAUDE.

[*Surprised*] This morning. Why?

ROBERT.

I don't know. It just occurred to me. Haven't you made up your mind sometimes in a weak moment to go and have a bathe? You go down to the beach and the sea looks icy. You try not to notice it. You go into your bathing machine, and it's cold and smelly. But you take off your clothes and put on your bathing costume, and then you open the door and you see in front of you a narrow bit of sea. And you wish you were dead.

[*During this speech MAUDE and ISABELLA have first pricked up their ears, then stared at him, and, finally, they turn and look at one another with amazement. CAROLINE comes in. She is now charmingly gowned.*]

ROBERT.

How do you do?

CAROLINE.

How d'you do?

MAUDE.

You absurd things.

CAROLINE.

[*Sharply.*] Don't be ridiculous, Maude.

ISABELLA.

We really ought to be going, dear.

CAROLINE.

Oh, aren't you going to stay to luncheon?

ISABELLA.

[*Obviously inventing.*] I'm lunching out. So are you, Maude, aren't you?

MAUDE.

Yes.

CAROLINE.

Oh, well, it's early yet. Don't go.

MAUDE.

I'm so sorry, but I must go and be tried on. It's such a bore.

ISABELLA.

You might drop me, perhaps; I have an appointment with my dentist. Good-bye, darling.

CAROLINE.

Good-bye. It's been so nice to see you.

[*They kiss one another.*]

ISABELLA.

Good-bye.

MAUDE.

[To ROBERT.] Dear Robert, we leave her in your care.

ISABELLA.

Dear, dear Robert.

[*They go out.*]

ROBERT.

That's how elephants must behave when they're being tactful.

CAROLINE.

How is it you're here so early? I wasn't expecting you till after the courts rose.

ROBERT.

Oh . . . I managed to get away. Maude said you were expecting me.

CAROLINE.

Yes, I was expecting you to tea. Don't you remember, you said yesterday you'd look in.

ROBERT.

I suppose I couldn't have a whisky and soda?

CAROLINE.

Yes, of course, I'll ring. [*She touches the bell.*]

ROBERT.

I've got to be back in chambers by one.

CAROLINE.

You must keep your eye on the time. You mustn't be late.

ROBERT.

[*Making conversation.*] What a nice woman Isabella is. Pity she doesn't get on with her husband.

CAROLINE.

Oh, but she does, only she gets on better with him when he's in India and she's in England. They're devoted to one another from a distance.

ROBERT.

There's something curiously feminine and sympathetic about her. She's not clever, but she's extraordinarily restful. I can imagine a man being extremely attached to Isabella.

CAROLINE.

She's still quite pretty.

ROBERT.

But, of course, one doesn't know what she'd be like to live with always. That's so different, isn't it?

CAROLINE.

[*With conviction.*] Oh, absolutely. [COOPER comes in.] Bring up the whisky and soda, Cooper, and a glass.

COOPER.

Very good, madam.

[Exit COOPER.]

ROBERT.

It reminds me of the case I'm in just now. Did you ever meet the Petersens?

CAROLINE.

I don't think so.

ROBERT.

Quite a nice woman. She was a Mrs. Macdougall. I've known Petersen for twenty years. I'd never have thought him capable of things like that.

CAROLINE.

What did he do?

ROBERT.

Oh, well, he'd been devoted to Mrs. Macdougall for years. It was an old-standing affair. Everybody accepted it. One always asked them to dinner together. At last they persuaded Macdougall to let himself be divorced. I'm acting for Mrs. Petersen now.

CAROLINE.

I must be very stupid, but where does Mrs. Petersen come? You've not mentioned her before.

ROBERT.

Mrs. Petersen was Mrs. Macdougall; you see, they got the divorce from Macdougall, then they married, and now they're divorcing.

CAROLINE.

Oh, I see. Of course. Very natural. How long have they been married?

ROBERT.

Eighteen months. And now they can't stand the sight of one another. She says he's dull when he's sober and brutal when he's drunk.

CAROLINE.

Ah! And what does he say?

ROBERT.

He marvels at his self-control. He can't imagine why he never killed her.

[*A short silence. COOPER comes in with the whisky. She goes out. ROBERT helps himself.*]

ROBERT.

I did a very unprofessional thing. I had a chat with Petersen in the club the other night. I told him I couldn't discuss the matter, but he insisted on telling me that he had no ill-feeling towards me because I was appearing for his wife. He said he only had himself to blame.

CAROLINE.

That was nice of him.

ROBERT.

Oh, he didn't mean it like that. He meant he ought to have known better than to marry her. He

said if a woman couldn't get on with one husband you might bet your boots she wouldn't get on with another. [*There is a momentary silence.*] Very nice whisky this is of yours, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

You ought to like it. You chose it.

[*He takes out a cigarette and lights it elaborately, pretending he is quite at ease.*]

ROBERT.

So your husband has died at last, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

Yes.

ROBERT.

I suppose you don't know what he died of?

CAROLINE.

No, I have no idea.

ROBERT.

Fever, I suppose. A man has to have a very fine physique to stand these climates indefinitely.

CAROLINE.

Stephen had a very fine physique.

ROBERT.

I suppose it was a great surprise to you when you read the announcement in this morning's *Times*?

CAROLINE.

Yes, it was.

ROBERT.

After all, death, even that of a person who was indifferent to you, is always a shock.

CAROLINE.

Yes, when a man is dead you seem only to remember his good qualities.

ROBERT.

It must be over ten years since you've seen him. I remember, when first I met you, you'd only been separated about three months. You haven't changed a bit in these ten years, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

I'm afraid that's only your fancy. You've seen me almost every day since then, and you naturally wouldn't notice any difference in me.

ROBERT.

That's true. In a way it's been a wonderful ten years, Caroline. We've found constant amusement in one another's society. You've been a great help to me. You've seen me rise from a struggling junior to a pretty good position. I don't see why I shouldn't be a judge before I die.

CAROLINE.

We've had some very good times together, haven't we?

ROBERT.

Wonderful !

CAROLINE

You've been a dear, Robert. You've always been so kind and patient.

ROBERT.

It certainly hasn't been hard to be either.

CAROLINE.

And you've got certain points that are strangely endearing. You never forget the little anniversaries that men find a bore to remember, but that women think so much of. You never fail to send me a little present on my birthday. Why, you even remember the day we first met and send me flowers. Ten times you've done that, Robert.

ROBERT.

By George, if this had only happened ten years ago. What a difference it would have made to us. We should be quite an old married couple by now, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

Do you wish it had ?

ROBERT.

What a question ! Why every day for ten years I've read the obituary column of *The Times* for that notice. It added a savour to breakfast.

CAROLINE.

And now at last it's come.

ROBERT.

I realize that I've lost for ever the little thrill of excitement that I always had when I took up the paper. I've often wished that your name began with a V or a W instead of an A, so that I might be able to prolong the agony a little as I read deliberately down the column.

CAROLINE.

There's always something a little melancholy in getting what one wants.

ROBERT.

Do you know, Caroline, I've never even seen a photograph of your husband.

CAROLINE.

I'm afraid I haven't one. When we separated I destroyed everything that could possibly remind me of him.

ROBERT.

I know. I shall never even know what that man looked like, and yet he has influenced my life more

than anyone else in the world. What sort of a man was he, Caroline?

CAROLINE.

An ordinary sort of man.

ROBERT.

It's rather queer if you come to think of it. If he hadn't lived I should have had an entirely different life; if he'd died years ago I should be another man from what I am now. Just by existing, a thousand miles away, obscurely, he's made me what I am.

CAROLINE.

Then we have at least something to be grateful to him for.

ROBERT.

Caroline, what a charming thing to say!

CAROLINE.

I never thought of it before, but I suppose I, too, have been influenced by Stephen, even though I never set eyes on him. I shouldn't be what I am either but for him.

ROBERT.

Life is a strange business, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

I'm beginning to think so.

[*A short silence.*]

ROBERT.

Well, I expect you've got a lot of things to do. I mustn't keep you.

CAROLINE.

And you have an appointment, haven't you? You mustn't be late for that.

ROBERT.

Oh, I've got my eye on the time.

CAROLINE.

Yes, I imagined you had.

ROBERT.

I thought I'd like to have a little chat with you at once.

CAROLINE.

It was kind of you to come, it's been pleasant to see you.

ROBERT.

I'll look in again about tea-time, may I?

CAROLINE.

Oh, yes, that'll be nice. I dare say I can get one or two people so that we can have a rubber of bridge before dinner.

ROBERT.

That always rests me after I've been in court
Well, good-bye, Caroline, God bless you.

CAROLINE.

Good-bye. I hope you win your case.

ROBERT.

Thanks.

[He goes to the door and opens it. She steps towards the bell to ring. At the door he hesitates. She looks at him and pauses. He half shuts the door and meditates. She withdraws her hand from the bell. He opens the door again, and she stretches out her hand once more. He braces himself for the ordeal, shuts the door quickly and comes back into the room. She turns away from the bell.]

ROBERT.

[With assumed cheerfulness.] I was almost forgetting the purpose of my visit.

CAROLINE.

Oh! Didn't you come just to pass the time of day?

ROBERT.

Well, not exactly, I think I'll just have a little drop more whisky if you don't mind. I can't imagine why my throat is so dry this morning.

,

CAROLINE.

I dare say there's a touch of east in the wind.

ROBERT.

[*Pouring out the whisky.*] Well, Caroline, what shall we do about it?

CAROLINE.

About what?

ROBERT.

[*Very busy with the siphon.*] When would you like us to be married?

CAROLINE.

Well, I haven't thought about the matter.

ROBERT.

We arranged that we would be as soon as your husband died.

CAROLINE.

Yes, I know.

ROBERT.

[*With assumed facetiousness.*] It only remains for you to name the day.

CAROLINE.

I'm not going to name one.

ROBERT.

My dear Caroline, you must. That is by old established custom the privilege of your sex.

CAROLINE.

What day would you suggest ?

ROBERT.

Obstinate woman ! I suppose you'll want some time to get a trousseau. And then banns take three weeks, don't they ? I couldn't get away till the end of term, anyhow. What about the beginning of the Long Vacation ?

CAROLINE.

I'm not going to marry you, Robert.

ROBERT.

Caroline !

CAROLINE.

I've thought it over very carefully and I've completely made up my mind.

ROBERT.

Do you mean to tell me that nothing I can say will induce you to change it ?

CAROLINE.

[*With a twinkle in her eyes.*] No !

ROBERT.

This is an awful shock to me, Caroline. This is an awful blow. I've been living in hopes of this moment for years, and now . . . now . . . you could knock me down with a feather.

CAROLINE.

[*With her tongue in her cheek.*] I'm sorry to cause you pain, Robert, but, believe me, I am acting for the best.

ROBERT.

Do you mean to say that you absolutely refuse to marry me?

CAROLINE.

Absolutely.

ROBERT.

[*A little uneasily.*] Caroline, has anything in my behaviour led you to imagine that my heart wasn't set on marrying you? Would your answer have been different if I had expressed myself differently? Women are very strange. Haven't I been ardent enough? You must remember that I'm a shy man. This is an occasion when one may reasonably feel a certain embarrassment. I'm no longer in my first youth, Caroline. I should have felt ridiculous if I'd thrown myself on one knee and all that sort of thing. I have had no wide and varied experience in making proposals of marriages.

CAROLINE.

Really. In that case I can only congratulate you. You made this one as though to the manner born. You were as cool as though you were ordering a dozen oysters and a pint of champagne.

ROBERT.

I didn't feel it, Caroline. I was shaking in every limb.

CAROLINE.

After all, you came to the point at once. I've known men with whom it required months of patience on the part of the object of their affections to bring them to it.

ROBERT.

Then I cannot understand why you refused me.

CAROLINE.

My dear Robert, we've been very happy in one another's company for ten years. We've been joined together by a very charming sentiment. Don't you think it would be a pity to expose it to the wear and tear of domestic life?

ROBERT.

You're a wonderful woman, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

Oh, it *had* occurred to you.

ROBERT.

It hadn't exactly occurred to me, but it had crossed my mind. After all, one has to look at these things from a rational point of view. We're very well as we are.

CAROLINE.

It seems a pity to make a change.

ROBERT.

Not a pity, Caroline ; a risk.

CAROLINE.

Then you agree that I was wise to refuse you.

ROBERT.

From your point of view, Caroline, I dare say there's a great deal to be said in favour of your decision. I, of course, could only have gained by the change.

CAROLINE.

It's nice of you to say so. But are you sure that you're not a little relieved that I refused you ?

ROBERT.

I? My dear Caroline, can't you see I'm overwhelmed with disappointment ?

CAROLINE.

It's not visible to the naked eye, Robert.

ROBERT.

You forget I have great power of self-control.

CAROLINE.

I shouldn't be hurt if you confessed that at the bottom of your heart you were feeling as though

you'd deliberately put your head in a noose, and then by a merciful interposition of Providence . . .

ROBERT.

[*Interrupting.*] Caroline, I have been wanting to marry you for years. And now that the opportunity at last occurs you refuse me. Well, I accept your reasons. I bow to the inevitable. I know you too well to try to make you change your mind, but don't think because I take it like this that my heart isn't . . .

CAROLINE.

Seared.

ROBERT.

Are you laughing at me, Caroline ?

[*He looks at her. She begins to chuckle. For a moment he assumes a pose of indignation. She tries to restrain her laughter, but finds it impossible ; he is gained by it, and begins to laugh also. Then they both roar till the tears run down their cheeks.*]

ROBERT.

Caroline, you're adorable.

CAROLINE.

You humbug, Robert.

ROBERT.

My dear, I had to do it. And I've done it, mind you, I've done it.

CAROLINE.

Yes, you've done it. And now we'll forget all about it.

ROBERT.

You know, I was terrified, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

Poor dear, I know. Your heart was in your boots, wasn't it?

ROBERT.

You don't bear me a grudge?

CAROLINE.

Of course not.

ROBERT.

You're wonderful, Caroline. Upon my soul I could almost marry you.

CAROLINE.

Dearest, I could very nearly consent to be your wife.

CURTAIN

ACT II

The scene is the same.

It is a little after four o'clock in the afternoon of the same day.

CAROLINE *is standing by the window looking out.*
COOPER *comes in.*

COOPER.

Mrs. Gilliatt has rung up to say she hopes you haven't forgotten you're going to tea with her at Rumplemeyer's, madam.

CAROLINE.

I haven't forgotten, Cooper. But I haven't the least intention of going.

COOPER.

I said I'd give you the message, ma'am; but I said I didn't think you were feeling very well.

CAROLINE.

It hadn't occurred to me, but I don't think I *am* feeling very well. I wish it would rain. It's so exasperating when the weather doesn't fit in with one's moods.

COOPER.

Shall I ring up Mrs. Gilliatt and say you're sorry you can't come to tea, ma'am?

CAROLINE.

Yes ; I think I'll lie down. The more I think of it the more I think I'm not very well.

[She lies down on the sofa.]

COOPER.

When one's feeling like what you are, ma'am, it always makes one feel better not to feel very well.

CAROLINE.

[Smiling.] That's rather confused, Cooper ; but I believe it's quite true. Put a lot of cushions behind me. *[This COOPER does.]* Thank you. Now put the cigarettes where I can reach them.

COOPER.

[Fetching them.] Yes, madam.

CAROLINE.

There are two books over there. Let me have them, will you ? Thank you. And give me the picture papers. There !

COOPER.

Shall I cover up your feet, ma'am ?

CAROLINE.

You might put that Spanish shawl over them, Cooper. It's always satisfactory to look nice even if there's no one to see you.

[COOPER carries out CAROLINE'S various directions.]

COOPER.

There, ma'am. Is there anything else?

CAROLINE.

No. I feel better already. I'm not at home to anybody, and I won't speak to anyone on the telephone.

COOPER.

Very good, ma'am.

CAROLINE.

I'm extremely pleased with my own society, Cooper. It's very nice to be alone when one wants to. I like to think it's my own house and nobody can cross my threshold without permission. It's really very pleasant to be one's own mistress.

COOPER.

Some people like a man about the house, ma'am, and some people don't.

CAROLINE.

I don't.

COOPER.

Ah, well, ma'am, you're one of the lucky ones; you can please yourself.

CAROLINE.

Cooper, what *do* you mean? You're not dissatisfied with your young man?

COOPER.

No, ma'am, not exactly that. But I don't know as I'd marry him if I 'ad anything better to look forward to.

CAROLINE.

But you're not obliged to marry him, Cooper.

COOPER.

Him or somebody else. It's not very satisfactory being in service all your life. And it isn't so easy for a parlourmaid to find places when she's getting on a bit.

CAROLINE.

Tell me, Cooper, how did he propose?

COOPER.

Well, ma'am, I don't know as he exactly proposed at all. You see, it was like this. I'd been walking out with him for something like two years, and he never said anything that you could take hold of, so to speak, so at last I said to him: Well, what about it? What about what? he said. You know what I mean, I said. I do not, he said. Well, do you mean it or do you not? I said. Is it a riddle? he said. No, I said, but I've been walking out with you for two years, and I just want to know if anything's to come of it or not. Oh, he said. I don't mind one way or the other, I said; but I'm not going to waste my time till doomsday, and I just want to know, that's all. Well, he said, what do you propose? Well, I

said, what about August Bank Holiday? Make it Christmas, he said; I get a rise then. All right, I said, as long as I know where I am I don't mind waiting, but I like to know where I am.

CAROLINE.

It wasn't very romantic, Cooper.

COOPER.

Well, ma'am, my belief is that men don't want to marry. It's not in their nature. You 'ave to give them a little push or you'll never bring them to it.

CAROLINE.

And supposing they regret it afterwards, Cooper?

COOPER.

Oh, well, ma'am, it's too late then. And you know, ma'am, they generally try to make the best of it when they know they can't help themselves.

CAROLINE.

And let us look on the bright side of things, Cooper; they're often not unhappy, poor brutes.

COOPER.

Oh, no, ma'am, I think they're much happier; but sometimes they won't realize it, so to speak.

CAROLINE.

That's human nature, Cooper. You won't forget to telephone to Mrs. Gilliatt.

COOPER.

[*Going.*] No, ma'am, I'll ring her up at once.

CAROLINE.

Oh, and, Cooper, you might ring up Dr. Cornish and ask him if he can come round.

COOPER.

I thought you were feeling better, ma'am?

CAROLINE.

I am, but I think it would comfort me to see a doctor. To be able to talk about oneself without fear of interruption is cheap at half a guinea.

COOPER.

Very good, ma'am.

[*Exit.* CAROLINE settles herself more comfortably than ever on the sofa; she takes one of the illustrated papers and begins to look at it. The door is quietly opened, and MAUDE FULTON puts a roguish head round the corner.]

MAUDE.

May I come in?

CAROLINE.

Good heavens, how you startled me!

MAUDE.

Say I may come in, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

No, you may not come in.

MAUDE.

[*Edging herself in.*] Don't be brutal, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

I think I've got scarlet fever.

MAUDE.

[*Opening the door a little more.*] I've had it.

CAROLINE.

On the other hand, it may be small-pox.

MAUDE.

[*Coming right in.*] I'm constantly being vaccinated.

CAROLINE.

I'm not at home, Maude.

MAUDE.

I know, but I felt sure you'd see me. Cooper didn't want to let me come up.

CAROLINE.

Servants are not what they were. She should only have let you force your way over her inanimate corpse.

MAUDE.

Darling, surely a corpse couldn't be anything else but inanimate.

CAROLINE.

Just as an intruder couldn't be anything else but intolerable.

MAUDE.

Now that you've had the last word, offer me a cup of tea and tell me all about it.

CAROLINE.

I shall *not*, Maude.

MAUDE.

Now don't be ridiculous, Caroline. I felt I *must* see you. You can't expect me to be entirely devoid of curiosity.

CAROLINE.

After knowing you for twenty years? No, my dear, I don't. But, on the other hand, you can't expect me to be such a fool as to gratify it.

MAUDE.

I naturally wanted to be the first to congratulate you. [*Insinuatingly.*] Caroline, tell me now how he did it.

CAROLINE.

D'you think it's fair to a man to tell a third party what romantic madness seized his tongue at such a moment?

MAUDE.

[*Eagerly.*] Oh, my dear, go on. I'm thrilled to the core.

CAROLINE.

[*She looks at her with an ironical smile.*] I was standing in the middle of the room, Maude, and he came up to me, and fell on one knee.

MAUDE.

Yes. Sir Walter Raleigh.

CAROLINE.

He took my hand. I turned a little away.

MAUDE.

Yes, yes.

CAROLINE.

At last, he said, at last! Oh, I have waited for this moment for a hundred years. I know I am utterly unworthy of you, but I adore the very ground you tread on. You are my ideal of woman. Oh, Caroline, Caroline, will you be mine? Clarence, I said. . . .

MAUDE.

Robert, you mean, surely.

CAROLINE.

[*Bursting into laughter.*] You fool, Maude. Can you see Robert making such a perfect ass of himself?

MAUDE.

Really, Caroline, you are exasperating.

CAROLINE.

Shall I tell you the honest truth ?

MAUDE.

[*Acidly.*] If you can.

CAROLINE.

He fiddled about with a siphon, and said : Well, when would you like to be married ?

MAUDE.

Oh ! I prefer the other way ; but after all it comes to the same in the end. Darling, I congratulate you with all my heart.

CAROLINE.

On getting an offer at my time of life ? Thank you very much.

MAUDE.

Don't be so silly. On your engagement

CAROLINE

But I'm not engaged.

MAUDE.

What *are* you talking about ?

CAROLINE.

I refused him.

MAUDE.

Good heavens ! Why ?

CAROLINE.

I thought I should be happier if I remained as I was.

MAUDE.

Caroline, how cruel of you! How abominably selfish! But what did Robert say?

CAROLINE.

He was almost too much surprised for words.

MAUDE.

Wasn't he overwhelmed?

CAROLINE.

I could see it was a disappointment, but he did all he could not to make it more difficult for me

MAUDE.

I can hardly believe my ears. What are you going to do, then?

CAROLINE.

I'm going to remain a widow. And to make it quite clear, I shall go into mourning. Gripe and weeds and all the trappings of woe. [MAUDE meditates for a moment, while CAROLINE watches her, wondering whether she accepts her account of the incident.] D'you think they'll suit me?

MAUDE.

[Tartly.] If they don't, I think you can be trusted not to wear them long.

CAROLINE.

I don't see why you should be cross with me.

MAUDE.

I'm disappointed in you, Caroline, and I'm very, very, very sorry for Robert.

CAROLINE.

Marry him, then.

MAUDE.

I'm not a marrying woman.

CAROLINE.

Neither am I. Sisters in adversity.

MAUDE.

Of course, he'll ask you again.

CAROLINE.

He's not such a fool.

MAUDE.

What do you mean by that?

CAROLINE.

[*Seeing that she has nearly given herself away.*] He knows he can go on asking me till he's blue in the face and I shall say no.

MAUDE.

Then there's nothing more to be said.

CAROLINE.

Nothing.

[COOPER comes in to announce DR. CORNISH.
*This is a very stout, red-faced, jovial gentleman,
with an optimistic view of life.*]

COOPER.

Dr. Cornish.

CAROLINE.

How do you do? Cooper, did you send that message?

COOPER.

Yes, ma'am. Mrs. Gilliatt said she'd just heard the dreadful news, and it must be a terrible shock and she quite understood; you had her sincerest sympathy, and she hoped you wouldn't forget that you were playing bridge with her to-morrow afternoon.

CAROLINE.

Thank you.

[Exit COOPER.]

CAROLINE.

[Turning to DR. CORNISH.] Now I can attend to you.

DR. CORNISH.

That's what I've come to do to you.

CAROLINE.

You know Miss Fulton?

DR. CORNISH.

[*Shaking hands with her.*] A homeopath, I believe.

MAUDE.

Oh, no, I've given that up. But I've got a wonderful bone-setter that I go to now.

DR. CORNISH.

Dear me, have you been breaking your bones?

MAUDE.

No, but I might.

DR. CORNISH.

I can recommend a very competent motor-omnibus if you are looking for something to run over you.

CAROLINE.

Now, Maude, Dr. Cornish has come to see me professionally. You've stayed quite long enough.

MAUDE.

Are you ill, darling?

CAROLINE.

I shall know that when Dr. Cornish has examined me.

MAUDE.

I thought you weren't looking quite up to the mark. Of course I'll go.

CAROLINE.

And don't come back till you're sent for.

MAUDE.

Dear Caroline. It's lucky I know she's devoted to me, or I might take offence at some of the things she says to me. Good-bye, Dr. Cornish.

DR. CORNISH.

[*Shaking hands with her.*] Does the bone-setter make love to you?

MAUDE.

Not more than most men.

[*Exit.*]

DR. CORNISH.

Now, dear lady, what is the matter with you?

CAROLINE.

Ill-temper.

DR. CORNISH.

An ailment very distressing to ladies' maids, I've always understood. I noticed you were suffering from it.

CAROLINE.

I didn't send for you so that you might have the pleasure of making yourself disagreeable and earning half a guinea into the bargain.

DR. CORNISH.

It does seem unfair, doesn't it? Let me feel your pulse.

CAROLINE.

[*As he takes her wrist.*] There's nothing wrong with my body. It's my mind.

DR. CORNISH.

What is amiss with that?

CAROLINE.

Well, for one thing I don't know it.

DR. CORNISH.

The British Empire is governed exclusively by gentlemen who suffer from the same complaint. You mustn't let that worry you.

CAROLINE.

I'm vexed and bored.

DR. CORNISH.

Has this got anything to do with the announcement I read in this morning's paper? I can well understand that the loss of a husband might cause any woman a momentary vexation.

CAROLINE.

No, I don't think it's that. I've just redecorated my dining-room, and I don't think it's quite a success. And, you know, these new fashions don't suit

me. I'm not pleased with any of the clothes I bought this spring. I dare say I'm a little run down and want a change of air.

DR. CORNISH.

Quite so. Quite so. Now tell me the truth.

CAROLINE.

But I'm telling you the truth.

DR. CORNISH.

Yes, I know ; but the true truth. Women make such distinction between the two.

CAROLINE.

[*Smiling.*] You must have a very large practice, Dr. Cornish.

DR. CORNISH.

I get along. Now come, dear lady.

CAROLINE.

I sent for you because I wanted to tell you the truth. I've known you so long, and I can trust you. You know, I'm devoted to Robert Oldham. I've wanted to marry him ever since we first met. And now that the opportunity has come, I don't want to.

DR. CORNISH.

I see.

CAROLINE.

Of course, nobody knows. Robert thinks I'm dying to marry him. And all my friends. You see, it

was an understood thing that we should marry as soon as I was free. He's waited for me all these years.

DR. CORNISH.

It's awkward, isn't it? I can see that Robert Oldham will think you a little unreasonable. He's no longer a young man.

CAROLINE.

That is what I said to myself. I thought the matter over from every standpoint. I remembered Robert's infinite patience, his devotion, and self-sacrifice, and I made up my mind that it was my duty to marry him.

DR. CORNISH.

It's hard to speak of duty in these matters; but if you ask my opinion, in this particular case I think you're right.

CAROLINE.

He came here this morning. I discovered that he didn't want to marry me in the least.

DR. CORNISH.

Well, that simplifies matters.

CAROLINE.

It does nothing of the kind. I was prepared to sacrifice myself. I'd made up my mind to an act of renunciation. I'd promised myself that he should never, never know the truth. You don't think it's

pleasant to realize suddenly that you're not wanted, and you can keep your self-sacrifice. It's enough to make any woman feel not very well.

DR. CORNISH.

Now, don't work yourself up into a scene, dear lady.

CAROLINE.

Why not?

DR. CORNISH.

I've seen so many. I assure you they have no effect on me at all.

CAROLINE.

In that case it isn't worth while, is it? But it is vexatious, Dr. Cornish, isn't it?

DR. CORNISH.

Very.

CAROLINE.

Upon my word I could almost wish my husband were alive again. [*No sooner are the words out of her mouth than the telephone bell rings.*] Good heavens, how it startled me! I told Cooper I wouldn't speak to anyone. Oh, I know what it is. It's my solicitor. They've had the answer to my cable. [*She takes up the receiver and listens.*] Yes. Lester and Lester? I was expecting you to ring me up. Yes, I'll hold on. [*To DR. CORNISH.*] They're putting me through to Sir Henry. Oh, the suspense! You know, I've had two or three false alarms of Stephen's death before.

Oh, if he's only alive this time it'll make such a difference. It'll put an end to all my difficulties. [*Speaking into the receiver.*] Yes. Sir Henry? You haven't had an answer to your cable? Then . . . Oh! [*To DR. CORNISH.*] He's seen Stephen's solicitor. [*Listening.*] I see. Thank you very much. It was kind of you to ring me up. Good-bye.

[*She puts down the receiver.*]

DR. CORNISH.

Well?

CAROLINE.

Stephen's solicitor has had a further cable from Nairobi. It appears my husband died in the hospital there four days ago of cirrhosis of the liver. Is that the sort of disease he would die from?

DR. CORNISH.

You must know that better than I. I never knew him.

CAROLINE.

Could brandy bring it on?

DR. CORNISH.

Nothing better.

CAROLINE.

Then that settles it. There can be no more doubt. I'm free.

DR. CORNISH.

Don't say it so despondently. It's a condition that most married people aspire to.

CAROLINE.

Doesn't it strike you that there's something distressingly obvious in being a widow? I can quite understand why a more delicate civilization than ours ordered the immolation of widows on their husband's pyre.

DR. CORNISH.

My dear lady, you take too gloomy a view of the situation. From the days of the ancients a certain gaiety has been ascribed to the condition which you now adorn.

CAROLINE.

I refuse to be gay. My husband spited me for ten years by living, now he spites me more than ever before by dying.

DR. CORNISH.

D'you know what's the matter with you?

CAROLINE.

If you say appendicitis I'll kill you.

DR. CORNISH.

I wish I could, for that is an ailment which can be cured by a trifling operation. But there's no escape from the malady I have in mind. There's no cure. There are no palliatives even. The most eminent

physician in the world can do no more than offer sympathy and consolation.

CAROLINE.

My dear Dr. Cornish, you freeze the very marrow in my bones. Tell me what it is quickly. I will brace myself to bear the worst.

DR. CORNISH.

Middle age.

CAROLINE.

Say that again.

DR. CORNISH.

Middle age.

CAROLINE.

Impossible ! Oh, impossible !

DR. CORNISH.

Let me suggest one or two symptoms to you. Haven't you noticed lately how young the policemen are about the streets ? Why, they're mere boys. But when you were a girl, don't you remember, they were middle-aged men.

CAROLINE.

Now that you come to speak of it I *have* noticed that the policemen are very young nowadays.

DR. CORNISH.

And when you're in a house party, haven't you noticed that some of the young people are really very

rowdy? It's lucky they keep more or less to themselves because their conversation really is very tedious.

CAROLINE.

But it *is* very tedious.

DR. CORNISH.

It's just the same as it was fifteen years ago, and you didn't find it so then.

CAROLINE.

You're beginning to frighten me.

DR. CORNISH.

You're devoted to dancing, aren't you?

CAROLINE.

[*Brightly.*] Passionately. That, at all events, hasn't left me.

DR. CORNISH.

But don't you find by about one in the morning you're rather tired and quite ready to go home?

CAROLINE.

I naturally don't want to be a wreck next day.

DR. CORNISH.

Were you a wreck next day fifteen years ago?

CAROLINE.

I used to be able to sleep till twelve o'clock next morning.

DR. CORNISH.

And now you can't? I know. At whatever time you go to bed you awake about eight, don't you? One does, you know, as one grows older.

CAROLINE.

I'm beginning to feel a hundred.

DR. CORNISH.

You mustn't take it too hardly. Things haven't gone very far yet.

CAROLINE.

[*Ironically.*] Thank you so much.

DR. CORNISH.

Perhaps you've noticed one white hair on your head, and you've said to your friends: I'm sure I shall be prematurely grey.

CAROLINE.

Are you enjoying this, Dr. Cornish?

DR. CORNISH.

It's not so tragic as you think.

CAROLINE.

Middle age?

DR. CORNISH.

It's true there are no remedies. Rouge, dye, powder, and pencil are not even palliatives; they merely emphasize the obvious.

CAROLINE.

You have nothing to recommend but resignation ?

DR. CORNISH.

I can offer comfort.

CAROLINE.

[*Shaking her head.*] No.

DR. CORNISH.

Dear lady, it's the happy time of a man's life. You have learnt your limitations. They are like a pack of cards, with which the skilful conjuror can do a hundred tricks. Passion no longer holds you enslaved. You go your way and attach no more importance to the opinion of your fellows than is seemly. You are sound in wind and limb and you are free. Good heavens, when I was young I did things I didn't want to because other people did. Now I do what I like. I wear the clothes I fancy, and don't ask myself if they're the fashion. When I'm tired I go to bed. When I'm bored I betake myself to my own counsel. Believe me, middle age is very pleasant. A book, a glass of wine, and Amaryllis sporting in the shade, while I—bask in the sun.

CAROLINE.

Is it because I'm middle-aged that Robert no longer wants to marry me ?

DR. CORNISH.

Not at all. I was explaining why you no longer wanted to marry him.

CAROLINE.

[*Taking a little mirror out of her bag and looking at herself in it.*] I see myself no different from what I was yesterday or ten years ago.

DR. CORNISH.

You're a very charming and a very fascinating woman..

CAROLINE.

I was never beautiful. At my best I was no more than pretty, but I've been quite content with that. People have found me amusing.

DR. CORNISH.

None more than I.

CAROLINE.

I've never lacked admiration. . . . It's been the breath of my nostrils, Dr. Cornish. If all that is to go, what is there left? Charity and good works? You talk like a man. You talk like a fool. You don't know what middle age is to a woman. It's very hard. It gives me such a pain in my heart. [*She begins to cry a little.* DR. CORNISH *watches her with not unkindly amusement.*] You're not going to charge me for this, are you? That would be more than I could bear.

DR. CORNISH.

On the contrary, I'm going to charge you double. A doctor is only supposed to give drugs, but I've given you common sense. [CAROLINE *gives a little cry.*] What is the matter?

CAROLINE.

May your hair fall out in bushels, and all your teeth rattle from your palsied gums. May your joints ache with rheumatism and your toes tingle with gout. May you wheeze and snore like an over-fed pug, and blow like a ridiculous grampus.

DR. CORNISH.

Mercy !

CAROLINE.

What a fool I am to let myself be harassed by you. We're nothing in ourselves. We're what other people think we are. I've just thought of Rex.

DR. CORNISH.

Who the dickens is Rex ?

CAROLINE.

Rex is passion and youth and love. To him, at all events, I'm young and charming. He loves me.

DR. CORNISH.

Ho, ho !

CAROLINE.

[*Going to the telephone.*] Mayfair 2315. Rex ? D'you know who it is ? [*She makes her voice as seductive as she knows how.*] What are you doing ? Idle creature. Under the circumstances . . . Under what circumstances ? Would you like to come and dine with me to-night ? [*Her face changes.*] Engaged ? You've never been engaged before when I've asked you. Can't you break the engagement ?

Oh, of course, if there's any difficulty you mustn't think of it. Anyhow, come round and see me now; we'll drink a dish of tea together. Very well. [*She puts down the receiver.*] He's coming at once.

DR. CORNISH.

What are you going to do?

CAROLINE.

I? Oh, I'm going to tell him that I've refused Robert.

DR. CORNISH.

And then?

CAROLINE.

[*Smiling.*] Then we'll see.

[*She draws a long, triumphant breath. It is obvious that she expects the young man then to fling his passionate heart at her feet.*]

DR. CORNISH.

My advice to you is to marry Robert Oldham.

CAROLINE.

He doesn't want to marry me.

DR. CORNISH.

Nag him a little.

CAROLINE.

Why should I marry him? He's not young. I don't believe we're suited to one another.

DR. CORNISH.

You try. You'll find you'll jog along quite comfortably.

CAROLINE.

Good heavens, I don't want to jog along. I want poetry, passion, romance.

DR. CORNISH.

[*Soothingly.*] Yes. I think I'll write you a little prescription. I dare say a gentle sedative will do you no harm.

CAROLINE.

[*As he prepares to sit down.*] You can write as many prescriptions as you like, but if you think I'm going to take your beastly medicine you're very much mistaken.

DR. CORNISH.

[*Writing.*] Human emotion is a queer business. Has it ever struck you that with a few grains of one drug you can make the timid heroic, and with a few grams of another the romantic, matter-of-fact. You can make the *femme incomprise* satisfied with her lot and the adventurer content to stick to his desk. You have read that the history of the world would have been different if Cleopatra's nose had been longer. My dear, I have no doubt that if Cleopatra had been treated with valerian and massage she would never have made such a fool of herself at the Battle of Actium, and I'm convinced that with the administration of a certain amount of strychnine and iron I could have persuaded Antony that it wasn't

worth while to lose an empire for her sake. Take this three times a day after meals. You'll find it'll do you a lot of good.

CAROLINE.

I don't want to be done good to.

[COOPER *comes in.*]

COOPER.

Mrs. Trench has called, ma'am.

CAROLINE.

I'm not at home, Cooper.

COOPER.

I said you were not at home, ma'am; but Mrs. Trench says you telephoned for her to come at once.

CAROLINE.

I? I did no such thing.

COOPER

What shall I say, ma'am?

CAROLINE.

I suppose she must come up.

COOPER.

Very good, ma'am.

[*Exit.*]

DR. CORNISH.

Well, good-bye, dear lady.

CAROLINE.

I'm twenty-five, Dr. Cornish. Romance is on the way to my door in a two-seater.

DR. CORNISH.

Send it away, and let common sense come trundling along in a four-wheeler.

CAROLINE.

Never. Good-bye.

[DR. CORNISH *goes out*. *In a moment* ISABELLA *comes in with* MAUDE FULTON.]

CAROLINE.

I'm delighted to see you, Isabella; but I can't make out what you mean by saying I telephoned.

MAUDE.

I telephoned.

CAROLINE.

You!

MAUDE.

I think it's absurd that you should refuse Robert Oldham. I sent for Isabella so that we might talk it over.

CAROLINE.

May I ask what business it is of Isabella's?

ISABELLA.

My dear, when your friends see you about to make a terrible mistake, they wouldn't be friends if they didn't do everything they could to save you from it.

CAROLINE.

I take it that you've talked the matter out downstairs.

MAUDE.

I put the case before Isabella as I saw it.

ISABELLA.

I can hardly believe it even now. It's the most astounding thing I've ever heard in my life.

CAROLINE.

I hope you've had a pleasant chat. Now I will ask you both to go away. I'm going to lie down.

MAUDE.

[*Sitting down firmly.*] No, Caroline, we will not go till you've heard what we have to say.

ISABELLA.

There must be some misunderstanding. It only requires a little good-will and everything can be put right.

CAROLINE.

Robert and I understand one another only too well.

ISABELLA.

I wonder if you haven't known him so long that you've ceased to realize what a very attractive man he is.

CAROLINE.

[*A little surprised.*] Do you find him so?

ISABELLA.

He's one of the most charming men I've ever met.

CAROLINE.

Oh!

ISABELLA.

He's very handsome. He has charming eyes.

CAROLINE.

Ah! That's just what he says about you.

ISABELLA.

[*Pleased.*] Really? Do tell me what he says.

CAROLINE.

What a pity you can't marry him yourself, Isabella!

ISABELLA.

Oh, I! He's never had eyes for anybody when you've been there.

CAROLINE.

Not till to-day. But then I'm not always there, am I?

ISABELLA.

What do you mean, Caroline? You're speaking quite acidly.

CAROLINE.

Oh, nothing.

MAUDE.

All that is neither here nor there. You can't afford to refuse Robert. You've been a good deal talked about in connection with Robert Oldham; but your friends have been exceedingly sympathetic owing to the peculiar circumstances. But honestly you owe it to them just as much as to yourself to marry the man as soon as you can.

CAROLINE

I'm going to marry to please myself, not to please my friends.

MAUDE.

Besides, it's high time you settled down.

CAROLINE.

Upon my word, I don't know why.

MAUDE.

You're no chicken, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

At all events, I'm younger than you, darling.

MAUDE.

A widow is as old as her possible husband, a spinster is as young as her latest young man.

CAROLINE.

Then if I choose a husband at all I'll choose one younger than Robert.

ISABELLA.

My dear, he's a perfect age. Everyone knows that young men think of nothing but themselves. It's the man of forty-five who makes much of you.

MAUDE.

Dear Caroline, I think the time has arrived to be frank.

CAROLINE.

Good heavens, haven't you been frank hitherto?

MAUDE.

I've been doing my best to spare your feelings.

CAROLINE.

I hadn't noticed it.

MAUDE.

I'm afraid I shall have to make myself a little unpleasant.

CAROLINE.

For my good or for your own satisfaction?

MAUDE.

By a merciful interposition of providence in these matters one can generally combine the two. I feel it my duty to tell you the whole truth.

CAROLINE.

Will it take very long?

MAUDE.

Why?

CAROLINE.

Only that I'm expecting Rex in a minute or two, and I'm afraid I must ask you to leave me when he comes.

MAUDE.

That's a very strange request.

CAROLINE.

He has asked to see me alone.

MAUDE.

What does he want?

CAROLINE.

I'm sure I don't know. I'm filled with curiosity.

MAUDE.

I won't conceal from you that I'm surprised, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

Are you?

MAUDE.

Yes, you see, I told him you were engaged to Robert Oldham.

CAROLINE.

[*Indignantly.*] You didn't. How dare you! Really, Maude, you take too much upon yourself. It's monstrous. I will not let you interfere with my affairs in this way. It's too monstrous.

MAUDE.

Well, I thought you would be. And what's more, you ought to be.

CAROLINE.

I'll never forgive you. How dare you? How dare you?

ISABELLA.

[*At the window.*] Here he is.

CAROLINE.

Rex?

ISABELLA.

He's just driven up.

MAUDE.

I'm not going, Caroline. We must thrash this matter out thoroughly. While Rex is here Isabella and I will have a cup of tea in your boudoir.

CAROLINE.

[*Ironically.*] Make yourselves at home, won't you?

MAUDE.

Come, Isabella.

CAROLINE.

[*Furiously.*] If you'd like an egg to your tea, mind you order it.

[*The two ladies go out. CAROLINE hurriedly looks at herself in the glass, arranges her hair a little, powders her nose, and settles herself down in a becoming attitude with a book. She is careful to arrange her skirt so that it shall make a graceful line. COOPER shows in REX CUNNINGHAM.*]

COOPER.

Mr. Cunningham.

[*Exit.*]

CAROLINE.

[*Very affably.*] How nice of you to come.

REX.

I thought I was never going to see you again.

CAROLINE.

Good heavens, why?

REX.

[*With a shrug of the shoulders.*] Let me congratulate you on your engagement.

CAROLINE.

D'you mean that my engagement entails the breaking of our friendship?

REX.

Don't you know how I've felt for you ever since I knew you? D'you think I have no heart?

CAROLINE.

No, I don't think that. You are romance, youth, passion.

REX.

I could bear to think of you as the wife of a man I'd never seen. He was far away, and I knew you didn't care for him. But now it's quite different.

CAROLINE.

You've known always that I was deeply attached to Robert.

REX.

If you knew how I've suffered.

CAROLINE.

Don't, Rex, you break my heart.

REX.

And I shall go on suffering. I know myself. I know what tortures I'm capable of. I've got that nature. But what must be, must be. The only thing is, I beseech you not to ask me to go on seeing you.

CAROLINE.

But I'm very fond of you.

REX.

You say that because you have a kind heart. You'll be happy with the man you love. I shall only be in the way. Say good-bye to me and let me go. I'm seeing you now for the last time. I shall never get over it. My life is blighted. But at all events let me spare you the sight of my torment. Let me suffer in silence and in solitude.

CAROLINE.

What would you say if I told you that I'd refused to marry Robert Oldham?

REX.

You? But Miss Fulton told me you were engaged.

CAROLINE.

She was mistaken.

REX.

[*Looking at her blankly.*] My hat!

CAROLINE.

[*A little surprised.*] Aren't you pleased?

REX.

Why did you refuse him?

CAROLINE.

I suppose because I didn't love him enough.

REX.

Are you quite sure you're wise?

CAROLINE.

I beg your pardon? I didn't expect you to ask me that question!

REX.

I'm thinking of your happiness.

CAROLINE.

It may be that my happiness lies elsewhere.

REX.

[*Not without embarrassment.*] After all, you've known Robert Oldham a great many years, haven't you?

CAROLINE.

Not so many as all that.

REX.

He's a very good chap. None better. He's by way of being distinguished too. I always feel rather insignificant beside him.

CAROLINE.

One might almost think you wanted me to marry him.

REX.

It would break my heart. You know that.

CAROLINE.

But——

REX.

Looking at it entirely from your point of view I can't help seeing it would be the best thing.

CAROLINE.

It's nice of you to be so anxious for my welfare.

REX.

That has been my first thought ever since I first saw you.

CAROLINE.

It's rare to find such unselfishness in a man.

REX.

I'm so accustomed to being absolutely wretched.

CAROLINE.

[*With a flush of insight.*] Are you sure you don't rather like it?

REX.

I? Do you know how many sleepless nights I've spent on your account?

CAROLINE.

And I felt so sorry for you, poor dear. Tell me, has nobody ever been in love with you?

REX.

I suppose so. But, I don't know why ; it's always bored me stiff.

CAROLINE.

I'm beginning to see daylight. You thrive on hopeless passion, my poor friend.

REX.

I don't know what you mean. If you think that I haven't been perfectly sincere in all I've said to you——

CAROLINE.

[*Interrupting.*] Oh, I'm sure you have. But hasn't my greatest attraction been that I didn't return your love ?

REX.

I never expected to hear *you* say such things to me, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

My dear, I don't blame you. We're as we're made. You are the unhappy lover. I was a donkey not to see it before.

REX.

You make me feel an awful fool, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

Don't grudge me that little bit of satisfaction. By the way, where are you dining to-night ?

REX.

Isabella asked me to eat a chop with her.

CAROLINE.

It crossed my mind that it might be she. Dear Isabella. You'll like her so much as you get to know her more. She has a husband in India and she'll never do anything to cause him any real uneasiness; but she has a very tender heart and an unlimited amount of sympathy.

REX.

Caroline, you don't think for a moment——?

CAROLINE.

No, but I recommend it. You see, now I've discovered that nothing can distress you more than to have your passion returned, I'm afraid I shan't succeed in being as sympathetic as you have the right to expect.

REX.

You're unjust to me, Caroline. It's not my fault if I'm only really happy when I'm utterly miserable.

CAROLINE.

I'm so glad I'm not. But it takes all sorts to make a world.

REX,

And you know, they never give me a chance. They're quite impossible.

CAROLINE.

Who?

REX.

Women.

CAROLINE.

They will fall on your neck, I suppose. They're affectionate creatures.

REX.

They're always wanting to sacrifice themselves.

CAROLINE.

I nearly did myself, Rex.

REX.

They're so selfish. They never will let a man be self-sacrificing and all that sort of thing. Why shouldn't a man be an object of pity? I want to deny myself, I want to stand aside, I *can* suffer in silence. I'm made like that.

CAROLINE.

Not quite in silence, Rex. But I'm keeping you, and I'm sure you have a hundred things to do. Good-bye.

REX.

No one will ever understand me. Good-bye. [*He goes to the door, opens it, and pauses a moment.*] And you know, Caroline, a woman is more desirable when she's unattainable. [*Exit.*]

CAROLINE.

[*A sudden light dawning upon her.*] A true word !
[*Pause.*] My hat !

[MAUDE FULTON and ISABELLA TRENCH
come in.]

MAUDE.

We heard him go.

CAROLINE.

Heavens, I'd forgotten all about you. [*To*
ISABELLA.] Well, my dear, you've not been
wasting your time with Rex, have you? *He* thinks
you have charming blue eyes too.

ISABELLA.

Caroline, what do you mean ?

CAROLINE.

It appears he's dining with you to-night.

ISABELLA.

I merely asked him because he seemed unhappy.

CAROLINE.

Unhappy? Why, he enjoys being unhappy. I
give him to you, Isabella, since you want him.

ISABELLA.

[*Outraged.*] Oh !

CAROLINE.

You'll just suit him. You'll listen to all his
protestations of affection, and you'll weep little salt

tears of sympathy when he tells you he adores you. And you'll give him to understand that your husband doesn't appreciate you. And you'll be dreadfully sorry for him. And I can trust you not to go an inch further than is quite safe. You mustn't do that because it'll put him out dreadfully. The last thing he wants is to have his feelings reciprocated.

ISABELLA. .

[*Beginning to cry.*] I never thought you'd say such things to me.

MAUDE.

Caroline, you've asked him to marry you and he's refused.

CAROLINE.

Oh, I haven't. Really that's too much. I've never been so insulted. [*She begins to cry also.*] Oh, I hate you, Maude, I hate you!

MAUDE.

Caroline!

CAROLINE.

You're a spiteful, envious cat.

MAUDE.

You've got no right to say such things to me. I've only aimed at your good.

[*She begins to cry. They all three sob angrily for a minute, then all three take their bags and pull out their mirrors.*]

ISABELLA.

Oh, my dear, what a fright I look.

CAROLINE.

Good heavens ! I look a perfect sight.

MAUDE.

Crying doesn't suit me one bit.

[These three speeches are said together, then all three take their puffs and powder their noses. While they are busily engaged COOPER comes in.]

COOPER.

Mr. Oldham has called, ma'am.

CAROLINE.

Not at home.

COOPER.

He said he'd come by appointment, ma'am.

MAUDE.

That's quite right. Show him up, Cooper.

COOPER.

Very good, miss.

[Exit.]

CAROLINE.

What d'you mean, Maude ?

MAUDE.

I sent for him.

CAROLINE

Abominable woman! I'm speechless! Maude, you abominable woman!

MAUDE.

I don't care if you're angry. The matter can't be left like this, and something's got to be done.

CAROLINE.

[*Making for the door.*] I won't see him.

MAUDE.

But he's here now.

CAROLINE.

Get rid of him, then. You think he's charming, Isabella, take him too.

ISABELLA.

He'll never go without seeing you.

CAROLINE.

Then I'll tell you why I refused him—because he didn't want to marry me. I saw his heart sink as the words were wrung out of him by his sense of decency. He asked me only because he felt he must.

MAUDE.

Oh, what nonsense! I oughtn't to have left you alone. You're a pair of children. I dare say he was a little nervous, and I'm sure you were.

CAROLINE.

There's no doubt that he was. If you'd seen the amount of whisky he took! Dutch courage to propose to me! Are you going to ask him now to marry me out of pity? I dare say he's already got a ticket for the South Sea Islands in his pocket.

ISABELLA.

Everyone knows that Robert has worshipped the ground you trod on for ten years. It's incredible that now, when he can at last achieve his greatest wish, he shouldn't want to.

CAROLINE.

You idiot, Isabella, don't you know that the only thing men want is the unattainable?

MAUDE.

I suppose you're quite sure that he did propose?

CAROLINE.

You may be quite certain that I wouldn't have let him out of the room before he did. I have my self-respect to think of.

MAUDE.

Perhaps you didn't make yourself alluring enough.

CAROLINE.

I made myself as alluring as I knew how.

MAUDE.

You should have waited till the evening. A good dinner and a bottle of champagne have a wonderful effect on the masculine heart.

ISABELLA.

And no woman is so attractive that she's not improved by shaded lights and an evening frock.

CAROLINE.

I didn't want him to come this morning. You did it. I knew very well that no man feels like marriage before luncheon.

MAUDE.

I thought Robert was an exceptional man.

CAROLINE.

No man's an exceptional man. You must know that by now.

ISABELLA.

What is he doing all this time?

CAROLINE.

Making up his mind to face the music. I won't come out of my room till he's gone.

[She flings out of the room. The two ladies are left astounded.]

MAUDE.

Well!

ISABELLA.

Dear Caroline is rather hard sometimes. She should show more tenderness.

[COOPER *ushers in* ROBERT OLDHAM *and then goes out.*]

COOPER.

Mr. Oldham.

ROBERT.

I just asked Cooper to give me a drink. Is Caroline not here? Good afternoon. [*Silence.*] Is anything the matter? When I came out of court my clerk gave me a message that I was to come at once on a matter of the greatest importance.

MAUDE.

I sent the message. I'm not pleased with you, Robert.

ROBERT.

How changeable you are. It's only a few hours ago since you insisted on kissing me.

MAUDE.

This is no time for flippancy.

ROBERT.

My dear Maude, if conscience took a human shape, I am convinced she would take yours. Believe me, nothing is further from me than flippancy.

MAUDE.

Then your conscience *is* troubling you.

ROBERT.

I never said so. It's perfectly at ease.

MAUDE.

In that case your remark was senseless.

ROBERT.

[*Desperately.*] Oh, heavens! I was only trying to be funny.

MAUDE.

I should have thought you knew enough about cross-examination to realize that it was an extremely damaging admission.

ROBERT.

Good God, woman, don't bully me. What is the matter?

MAUDE.

[*Impressively.*] What have you done to Caroline?

ROBERT.

I? I don't understand what you mean?

MAUDE

When we came here, Isabella and I, to congratulate her, we found Caroline in a state of complete collapse. Isn't that so, Isabella?

ISABELLA.

[*A little doubtfully.*] Yes, Maude.

MAUDE.

She was crying her eyes out. Her maid told us that she'd had one fainting fit after another. The *sul volatile* bottle was empty. Isn't that so, Isabella?

ISABELLA.

[*Very uncomfortably.*] Yes, Maude.

MAUDE.

We had to send for the doctor. He says her condition is most alarming, and it'll be a miracle if she escapes brain fever.

ROBERT.

Good God!

MAUDE.

I repeat, what have you done to Caroline?

ROBERT.

Nothing. I asked her to marry me.

MAUDE.

Ah! That confirms Caroline's statement, Isabella. And she refused. Weren't you a little surprised?

ROBERT.

My dear Maude, surprised isn't the word. I was staggered. I'm reeling under the blow still.

MAUDE.

It must have seemed incomprehensible.

ROBERT.

Imagine. For ten years I've longed for the moment when I might be able to ask her to be my wife. It has been my dearest hope. There was nothing in the world I wanted more. She shatters all my expectations at a blow. At the moment it seems to me that I have nothing left to live for. I suppose I shall get over it in time, but . . .

MAUDE.

Why don't you ask her again?

ROBERT.

She made me understand that her decision was quite irrevocable. And, after all, my pride is deeply hurt. I cannot expose myself a second time to so monstrous a humiliation.

MAUDE.

Fiddle !

ROBERT.

Really, Maude, I think you might show me some sympathy in the bitterest disappointment of my life.

MAUDE.

My dear friend, Caroline refused you because you showed her very plainly that you didn't want to marry her.

ROBERT.

Oh, what nonsense ! Everyone knows I wanted to marry her.

MAUDE.

You asked her as though it was a duty you owed her. A woman of spirit would naturally refuse. I would have refused you myself.

ROBERT.

Isabella, everyone knows Maude is a terrible liar. Tell me, is there a word of truth in what she says?

ISABELLA.

Perhaps you didn't quite realize that a woman doesn't like these things arranged in too matter-of-fact a way. You should have made love to her. I'm sure you do it very well.

ROBERT.

[*Sitting down beside her.*] What makes you think that?

ISABELLA.

That is the sort of thing that every woman knows.

ROBERT.

What intuition you have, Isabella.

ISABELLA.

[*Putting her hand on his.*] I know you love her, Robert.

ROBERT.

[*Taking her hand.*] I'm devoted to her.

ISABELLA.

Let a charming story have a charming end.

ROBERT.

I wonder if she really cares for me, Isabella.

ISABELLA.

Oh, how can you doubt it? Women are faithful creatures, Robert.

ROBERT.

Fidelity is not the characteristic which I have found most conspicuous in them in my practice at the Bar.

ISABELLA.

D'you know that Caroline is jealous of you?

ROBERT.

Oh, come; what makes you think that?

ISABELLA.

She's furious with me. Of course, I know she's not quite herself to-day, but she's been unkind to me. It appears that you told her I had charming blue eyes.

ROBERT.

So you have.

ISABELLA.

You ought to have said it to me. I should have understood. I'm afraid she took it amiss.

ROBERT.

You would understand anything.

ISABELLA.

I suppose I have a natural gift of sympathy. Of course, Caroline is charming, but she *is* a little lacking in tenderness sometimes, don't you think so?

ROBERT.

That is your most exquisite trait.

MAUDE.

Really, Isabella, I don't know what you think you're doing.

ISABELLA.

[*With some asperity.*] My dear, I wish you'd let me do things in my own way.

MAUDE.

I can't see that anything you've said for the last five minutes will make it any clearer to Robert that it is his duty to marry Caroline.

ROBERT.

Duty! Stern daughter of the voice of God.

MAUDE.

You've compromised her. You've got her talked about. There's only one course open to you. You owe it to yourself and you owe it to her. And you owe it to us.

ROBERT.

Oh, really. Do you think so?

MAUDE.

We can't be deprived now of the satisfaction of seeing you both happy. You've behaved like a gentleman hitherto; I recommend you to play the rôle with elegance to the end.

ROBERT.

[*He thinks it over for a moment. He makes up his mind.*] I'll see Caroline.

MAUDE.

We will leave you. Come, Isabella. We have done our duty, and the saints in heaven can do no more.

ISABELLA.

Good-bye.

[*He opens the door for them and they go out. He rings the bell. He walks up and down moodily once or twice, but then braces himself; he is an Englishman, and fears no foe. COOPER comes in.*]

ROBERT.

Will you ask Mrs. Ashley if I^s could see her for a few minutes?

COOPER.

Mrs. Ashley is engaged, sir.

ROBERT.

I'll wait till she is free.

COOPER.

Very good, sir. [*Exit COOPER. In a moment she comes in again.*] Mrs. Ashley is ill, sir, and unable to see anyone.

ROBERT.

I'll wait till she's well.

COOPER.

Very good, sir. [*She goes out and in a moment more comes back.*] Mrs. Ashley is dead, sir.

ROBERT.

I'll wait till she comes to life. This is the day of judgment, and the last trump is sounding loud and long.

COOPER.

Very good, sir.

[*Exit. This brings CAROLINE.*]

CAROLINE.

Have they gone?

ROBERT.

Thank God!

CAROLINE.

[*Culling.*] Cooper.

COOPER.

[*Coming in.*] Yes, ma'am ?

CAROLINE.

Put the chain on the door and don't let anyone in, or I'll give you your notice.

COOPER.

Very good, ma'am.

[*Exit.*]

CAROLINE.

Your message was so pathetic that I had to come, Robert.

ROBERT.

Look here, Caroline, you behaved very badly in putting all the blame on me. You didn't so very much want to marry me, did you ?

CAROLINE.

[*Smiling.*] Not so very much.

ROBERT.

Then what's all this nonsense about floods of tears and fainting fits ?

CAROLINE.

Who told you that ?

ROBERT.

Maude. She said you were in a state of collapse, and would only escape brain fever by a miracle.

CAROLINE.

[*Chuckling.*] You didn't believe it?

ROBERT.

No. But I thought you might be up to some monkey trick.

CAROLINE.

I bore the blasting of all my hopes with complete fortitude, Robert.

ROBERT.

Well, now look here, Caroline, it's no good kicking against the pricks. We've got to marry.

CAROLINE.

[*Energetically.*] I'm hanged if we do.

ROBERT.

You know, this is only the beginning. We shall be left no peace. Sooner or later we shall be driven to it. We may just as well resign ourselves and bow to the inevitable.

CAROLINE.

If I marry it'll be because I want to, not to please my friends.

ROBERT.

My dear, I have a large experience of the reasons for which two people marry. They marry from pique, or loneliness, or fear, for money, position, or boredom; because they can't get out of it, or because

their friends think it'll be a good thing, because no one has ever asked them before, or because they're afraid of being left on the shelf ; but the one reason which infallibly leads to disaster is when they marry because they want to.

CAROLINE.

You're only saying that to reassure me.

ROBERT.

D'you think Maude and Isabella will give up the struggle? Never! They'll be joined by all your friends, who'll think it very funny that you don't marry, and by all mine, who'll think there's a discreditable reason on my side, by your uncles and aunts, by my nephews and nieces. My dear girl, we haven't a chance.

CAROLINE.

I will fight to the last cartridge, Robert.

ROBERT.

After all, I dare say we'll jog along well enough.

CAROLINE.

[*Vehemently.*] Jog along! jog along! jog along! I don't want to jog along.

ROBERT.

You know I'm devoted to you, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

I'm devoted to you, Robert.

ROBERT.

But I don't mind telling you now that at the first moment the thought of marriage frightened me out of my wits. It meant changing all my habits and forming new ones. It meant giving up my freedom. . . . You don't mind my saying this, do you?

CAROLINE.

My dear, I didn't feel very differently myself.

ROBERT.

It's not that I want to be a gay dog, but I want to be able to be a gay dog if I want to.

CAROLINE.

I know. Don't you know how you feel when you've been a long journey, and your train steams in at night to some strange city that you've never been in before. All the lights are twinkling. And a wonderful excitement seizes you, and you think any adventure may happen to you. It never does, but it always may. Oh, Robert, if you were sitting on the seat opposite me I'd know it never could.

ROBERT.

It's no good, Caroline; we're the heroes of romance, you and I. We've got to satisfy the human craving for a happy ending.

CAROLINE.

I wish to heaven my husband had never died.

ROBERT.

You know, Caroline, perhaps we shall feel quite differently about it when we *are* married.

CAROLINE.

What makes you think that?

ROBERT.

I knew a man in South Africa who was engaged to a girl in England, and he wasn't able to send for her till they'd been engaged for seven years. He went to meet her at Durban, but just as the boat was coming in his courage failed him, and he turned and ran. She chased him to Cape Town. He fled to Johannesburg. She chased him to Port Elizabeth. He fled to Lorenzo-Marquez. My dear, she chased him up and down the Continent of Africa, and at last she cornered him. She married him out of hand, and ever since he's been the happiest man alive.

CAROLINE.

I'm not thinking of you, Robert; I'm thinking entirely of myself.

ROBERT.

My dear, in another hour Maude will be on your doorstep.

CAROLINE.

The chain is up.

ROBERT.

She'll bring a camp-stool and sandwiches.

CAROLINE.

Robert, this is intolerable ! Is there nothing you can do ?

ROBERT.

Good heavens, what can I do ? I'm a desperate man.

CAROLINE.

I don't like to ask you to commit suicide.

ROBERT.

That's lucky, because I have no intention of doing so.

CAROLINE.

I suppose you wouldn't marry Maude ?

ROBERT.

No. Certainly not !

CAROLINE.

Is there nothing you'll do for me ?

ROBERT.

I'll marry you.

CAROLINE.

Pooh, you're doing that for yourself, not for me.

ROBERT.

It's no good quarrelling. We shall have plenty of time for that when we're married.

CAROLINE.

D'you know, we've never quarrelled once in all the time we've known one another.

ROBERT.

That augurs well for the future, at all events.

CAROLINE.

Robert, I don't want to marry you.

ROBERT.

Come, my dear, just a little courage. I wouldn't press you if I saw a way out, but there isn't one.

CAROLINE.

Are you sure ?

ROBERT.

Positive. It's the only way.

CAROLINE.

It's a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done before, Robert.

ROBERT.

Then it's settled ?

CAROLINE.

[*With a sigh.*] It's settled.

ROBERT.

We'd better get it over quickly, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

I suppose nothing is gained by delaying.

ROBERT.

It's lucky I didn't resign from those clubs as I talked of doing.

CAROLINE.

Why?

ROBERT.

Well, it was a mere extravagance, I never went near them; but I shall want them when I am married.

CAROLINE.

I thought it was chiefly bachelors who used clubs.

ROBERT.

Oh, no; bachelors don't mind staying at home.

CAROLINE.

This will make a great change in your life, Robert.

ROBERT.

I've always been very domestic. I dare say it'll do me good to be shaken up a bit.

CAROLINE.

You spent practically all your evenings here. I'm sure it won't hurt you to see a little more of other people.

ROBERT.

We were getting into a groove, Caroline. I dare say it wanted something like this to stir us up. I look forward to the future with considerable pleasure.

CAROLINE.

The past was very pleasant, Robert. A *tête-à-tête* will never be the same thing again.

ROBERT.

You're thinking of the little suppers we used to have at the Savoy after the play. They were jolly, weren't they?

CAROLINE.

And you know, Robert, I never lost the little thrill it gave me to come and dine with you in your house. They were harmless little dinners enough, but there was always a sense of adventure when I took off my cloak in your hall.

ROBERT.

By the way, what are you going to do about getting rid of your house?

CAROLINE.

[*Astounded.*] I'm not going to get rid of my house.

ROBERT.

My dear, we don't want two.

CAROLINE.

Of course not. I naturally supposed you'd sell yours.

ROBERT.

Why? I've had my house for twenty years. I'm very much attached to it. You've only got a lease.

CAROLINE.

That's got nothing to do with it. I've just had it redecorated. I've spent a fortune on my bathroom.

ROBERT.

You're not going to ask me to have my bath in a futurist bathroom. I never feel my best before breakfast as it is.

CAROLINE.

I'm sorry you don't like my bathroom. But that's a matter of taste.

ROBERT.

Personally, I don't see what anyone can want more than plain white tiles. It's clean, sanitary, and cheerful.

CAROLINE.

[*Beginning to be vexed.*] Oh, of course you always think your own things are better than anybody else's. Your bathroom is just like a tube station. I really can't see myself having my bath in it. I should be afraid all the time that a young man was going to pop in and say: Next station—Marble Arch!

ROBERT.

My dear child, you must be sensible. It's perfectly obvious that my house is a much nicer one than yours.

CAROLINE.

[*Sharply.*] I don't agree with you at all.

ROBERT.

[*Impatiently.*] Of course, if you won't listen to reason, there's nothing more to be said.

CAROLINE.

I tell you frankly that nothing will induce me to leave this house.

ROBERT.

Really, this is sheer obstinacy. There's no room for me here. There's not even a room that I can make into a study.

CAROLINE.

Oh, yes, there is. There's that very nice little room behind the dining-room.

ROBERT.

[*Indignantly.*] It looks out on a blank wall.

CAROLINE.

That's just why I thought it would do so well for a study. There'll be nothing to distract your thoughts.

ROBERT.

You've told me a hundred times you could do nothing with it—it was like an ice-box in winter and like a furnace in summer. Really, if you have no more affection for me than that . . .

CAROLINE.

It isn't a matter of affection, it's a matter of common sense. Your house is very nice for a bachelor . . .

ROBERT.

[*Interrupting.*] Thank you.

CAROLINE.

But it's quite unsuitable for a woman. There are no cupboards.

ROBERT.

Now you're *making* difficulties, Caroline. Cupboards can be built.

CAROLINE.

And which room have you settled for my boudoir? The coal-cellar? It's preposterous.

ROBERT.

[*With temper.*] I'm not going to argue the matter, Caroline. I've made up my mind and there's an end of it.

CAROLINE.

[*Quite decidedly.*] I happen to have made up my mind too.

ROBERT.

When I was waiting for you just now I decided exactly how to arrange matters. You shall have the best bedroom, of course.

CAROLINE.

It hasn't any sun, I know it.

ROBERT.

[*With dignity.*] It is the room that my poor Aunt Charlotte died in, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

That doesn't make it any pleasanter for me to live in.

ROBERT.

My dear Caroline, I cannot understand your attitude.

CAROLINE.

It's quite simple. I'm pleased with my house and I'm going to stick to it.

ROBERT.

It's fortunate that I'm the most patient man in the world. It's obvious that a woman comes to her husband's house.

CAROLINE.

I don't see why at all.

ROBERT.

My dear, it's one of the best-established customs of the human race. We have Biblical authority for it. A woman is enjoined to forsake all and follow her husband.

CAROLINE.

You don't know what you're talking about. Before you quote the Bible I recommend you to read it.

ROBERT.

[*Fuming.*] Really, Caroline, I must protest against the tone you're taking up. *I* am discussing the matter in the most friendly spirit.

CAROLINE.

[*Furious.*] Surely you're not going to accuse me of being acrimonious. You said just now we'd never quarrelled. Believe me, it isn't because you haven't given me abundant provocation.

ROBERT.

I think we'll resume the conversation when you're a little calmer, Caroline. You'll only say things now which you'll regret later.

CAROLINE.

Don't think for an instant you can impress me by being patronizing, Robert. I have no wish to resume the conversation. I've already said all I had to say.

ROBERT.

The great thing is that we should clearly understand one another. I am prepared to gratify all your whims, however unreasonable they may be, and heaven knows, for the most part they're unreasonable enough ; but this is a matter of principle. I mean to begin as I mean to go on. I wish you to put this house in the agent's hands at once.

CAROLINE.

I shall do nothing of the sort.

ROBERT.

Caroline, I have put my request in the most courteous and obliging way possible; but I do not expect it to be disregarded.

CAROLINE.

I presume you are talking for your own entertainment; you're certainly not talking for mine.

ROBERT.

Let me make myself quite clear, Caroline. I refuse to come and live in this house.

CAROLINE.

That is unfortunate, because nothing will induce me to come and live in yours.

ROBERT.

Perhaps you'd like to think the matter over.

CAROLINE.

No, thank you. I've quite made up my mind. If you want to marry me you must come and live here.

ROBERT.

I will not marry you unless you consent to live in my house.

CAROLINE.

Very well. That settles it.

ROBERT.

Take care, Caroline. I've proposed twice now. I shall not propose a third time.

CAROLINE.

I wouldn't marry you now if you crawled on your bended knees from the Tower of London to Buckingham Palace.

ROBERT.

In that case the marriage is off, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

I was willing to sacrifice myself, but it's a little too much to expect that all the sacrificing should be on my side.

ROBERT.

Sacrifice, you call it. I was marrying you out of pure good nature.

CAROLINE.

Good heavens, what an escape I've had! I might have been chained to you for life.

ROBERT.

It shows what women are. Even the ablest men are children in their hands. I've known you ten years, Caroline, and this is the first time you've shown yourself in your true colours.

CAROLINE.

I've always known that you were selfish, vain, and dyspeptic; but I shut my eyes to it. I've been

punished. I didn't like you the first time I saw you. It's always a mistake not to trust to first impressions.

ROBERT.

In that case, I'm surprised that you threw yourself at my head in the way you did.

CAROLINE.

Thank heaven, my eyes are opened at last! And as to throwing myself at your head, I would never have looked at you if you hadn't pestered me with your attentions.

ROBERT.

[*Ironically.*] I suppose you were sorry for me?

CAROLINE.

No, but I knew you were *safe*. And I can't imagine anything more ridiculous in a man than that.

ROBERT.

[*Boiling.*] Oh! oh! I will never speak to you again, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

You don't think I wish to continue our acquaintance, do you?

ROBERT.

Have you anything more to say to me?

CAROLINE.

Only this. Perhaps you'd like to meditate over it. If you were the only man in the world I wouldn't marry you.

ROBERT.

Caroline, I can truthfully say that if I had to choose between the altar and the scaffold I would undoubtedly choose the scaffold. Good-bye.

CAROLINE.

Good riddance ! [*He is going to the door. Suddenly the telephone bell rings. They both give a gasp. They look at one another in dismay. The bell rings firmly.*] It's Maude.

ROBERT.

Good God ! I'd forgotten about her.

CAROLINE.

What shall I do ?

ROBERT.

I'm off, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

You coward ! You can't leave me like that.

ROBERT.

Well, you'd better answer it.

CAROLINE.

You answer it, Robert. You're a man.

ROBERT.

I daren't, Caroline.

[*Meanwhile the bell rings persistently, angrily.*]

CAROLINE.

For goodness' sake, stop it ringing !

ROBERT.

It'll never stop till you answer.

CAROLINE.

I wish to heaven I'd never had the telephone put in.

ROBERT.

I always disliked Maude.

CAROLINE.

She's a detestable woman !

ROBERT.

I can't imagine why you ever put up with her.

CAROLINE.

I hate her, I hate her ! [*Desperately.*] For goodness' sake, stop that ringing !

ROBERT.

Take the receiver off.

CAROLINE.

You take it off, Robert.

ROBERT.

Caroline.

CAROLINE.

Oh, Robert, if you've ever loved me.

ROBERT.

I'll do it.

[*He creeps towards the table as though it were a beast that might bite ; he stalks it carefully, stealthily, then with a sudden bound leaps on to the telephone and snatches the receiver off. CAROLINE gives a shriek. He bounds back and they are close together. She clings to him. They tremble with fear.*]

ROBERT.

I've done it.

CAROLINE.

Don't leave me, Robert.

ROBERT.

No, I won't leave you.

CAROLINE.

Oh, Robert, I shall never forget this.

ROBERT.

She thinks we're listening. She's talking at her end now. I expect she's getting angry. She's making a scene.

CAROLINE.

Oh, Robert, I wonder what she's saying.

ROBERT.

Can't you guess ?

CAROLINE.

Thank God, the chain is on the door ! She'll be round in ten minutes.

[They look at one another in dismay.]

ROBERT.

It's no good, Caroline. We've got to get married.

CAROLINE.

I know. But what is to be done ? You must think of some way out, Robert.

ROBERT.

There's only one. We must give up both houses and take a new one.

CAROLINE.

But I like my house, Robert.

ROBERT.

I like mine.

CAROLINE.

It'll be a wrench for both of us. That's some comfort.

ROBERT.

Our first sacrifice on the altar of connubial bliss.

CAROLINE.

You'll let me decorate the new house, Robert.

ROBERT.

All except the bathroom. Give me that as a wedding-present.

CAROLINE.

I tell you what, we'll each have a bathroom. You can have yours like a tube station.

ROBERT.

And you shall have one like an attack of gastritis.

CAROLINE.

[*With a sigh.*] If it's got to be done it had better be done at once. I'll ring up the house agent.

[*She takes up the telephone-book and looks out an address.*]

ROBERT.

Shall we be married by special licence?

CAROLINE.

I haven't an idea.

ROBERT.

I think I'll just go round to the club. Petersen is sure to be there, and he's had a lot of experience in these matters. There's no reason why I shouldn't ask him that.

CAROLINE.

Oh, how did the divorce go?

ROBERT.

First rate. I think it'll last for four or five days. Neither of them will have a shred of reputation by the time it's over.

CAROLINE.

[*At the telephone.*] Mayfair 148. Are you Messrs. Gaskell and Birch? I want to let my house. . . . I can't say it all on the telephone. Will you send somebody round. No. At once. Where? Oh, Mrs. Ashley, Curzon Terrace, Regent's Park.

[*She puts down the receiver.*]

ROBERT.

Is there anything more you want to say to me? I'll be back presently to tell you what I've found out.

CAROLINE.

Before dinner?

ROBERT.

Oh, yes. By the way, about dinner. Don't you think we need cheering up a bit? I'm afraid it would be rather dull dining by ourselves.

CAROLINE.

I think it would rather.

ROBERT.

Why don't you ask Isabella?

CAROLINE.

Rex Cunningham is dining with her. I might ask him too, and we can play bridge.

ROBERT.

Oh, yes ; that'll be jolly. [CAROLINE *takes out her patience cards.*] What are you going to do now ?

CAROLINE.

Oh, I'll have a game of patience.

ROBERT.

Yes, do. It'll rest you.
[*He goes towards the door.*]

CAROLINE.

Robert.

ROBERT.

Yes ?

CAROLINE.

It's emeralds I like, you know.

ROBERT.

I'm glad you reminded me.
[*He goes out. She begins to put out her patience cards.*]

CURTAIN

ACT III

SCENE : *The same. It is ten minutes later.*

[CAROLINE is finishing her game of patience.

COOPER shows in DR. CORNISH.]

COOPER.

Dr. Cornish.

[*Erit.*]

CAROLINE.

This is a joyful surprise. I've torn up your prescription.

DR. CORNISH.

How on earth do you expect a doctor to make a living if you won't take medicine! You'll remain perfectly well.

CAROLINE.

You didn't talk like that just now.

DR. CORNISH.

That was a visit. This is a call.

CAROLINE.

I hesitate to ask his reason.

DR. CORNISH.

You need not. I was just going to tell you. I'm devoured with curiosity.

CAROLINE.

That isn't one of the failings that middle age eradicates?

DR. CORNISH.

Tell me, which has won, romance or common sense? Are you going to marry Robert Oldham or Rex Cunningham?

CAROLINE.

My dear doctor, Rex Cunningham is a mere boy.

DR. CORNISH.

Oh, I've known those marriages turn out very well. My last cook married the lad who came in to do the boots and knives, and they're very happy. At least I haven't heard anything to the contrary.

CAROLINE.

I wonder how she worked it.

DR. CORNISH.

The policy of nag, I believe.

CAROLINE.

I've promised to marry Robert Oldham.

DR. CORNISH.

Then it only remains for me to congratulate you.

CAROLINE.

One comfort is that my friends will have to give me wedding-presents. I get back on them that way, don't I?

DR. CORNISH.

I'm sure you'll be very happy.

CAROLINE.

[*Tartly.*] I'm sure I shall be nothing of the sort.

DR. CORNISH.

Don't jump down my throat.

CAROLINE.

You know I'm very fond of Robert. I don't want to lose him.

DR. CORNISH.

Is that inevitable?

CAROLINE.

Haven't you noticed that other people's bread-and-butter is always much nicer than your own? Robert is like that. He always prefers somebody else's fireside. If I marry him, where is he going to spend his evenings?

DR. CORNISH.

I only see one way out of it. You must marry somebody else.

CAROLINE.

I believe it's the only way I can keep Robert. It's very hard if you come to think of it.

DR. CORNISH.

Especially on the innocent victim.

CAROLINE.

Whom d'you think I'd better marry?

DR. CORNISH.

Let us examine your circle of friends and see who would meet your requirements.

CAROLINE.

[*With a twinkle in her eye.*] I don't think it ought to be anyone too young.

DR. CORNISH.

No, a man of a certain age.

CAROLINE.

I rather like grey hair, don't you?

DR. CORNISH.

A professional man, of course.

CAROLINE.

Oh, yes, I'd like him to have interests in common with Robert.

DR. CORNISH.

He oughtn't to be a barrister. It would be such a bore for you if they talked shop together.

CAROLINE.

I don't see why he shouldn't be a doctor.

DR. CORNISH.

Yes, I don't think that's a bad idea. And of course if he had a pretty large practice it would keep him busy, wouldn't it?

CAROLINE.

Yes. Now, there's only one thing more. I think he ought to be a great friend of Robert's.

DR. CORNISH.

Obviously that would make matters much simpler. Now, let us think. I wonder who there is.

CAROLINE.

Don't bother, Dr. Cornish. I've already made up my mind.

DR. CORNISH.

God bless my soul, you're very quick.

CAROLINE.

You are going to marry me.

DR. CORNISH.

[*With great decision.*] No, I'm not.

CAROLINE.

Now, my dear friend, don't be unreasonable. You meet the requirements in a manner that I can only describe as miraculous.

DR. CORNISH.

My dear lady, let us put things in their places. I am your medical attendant, not an aspirant to your hand.

CAROLINE.

Oh, but you said just now that this was a call and not a visit.

DR. CORNISH.

We can easily settle that. I will charge you half a guinea, and that makes it a visit.

CAROLINE.

I thought you were a man of the world.

DR. CORNISH.

If that means getting out of an awkward predicament gracefully, I flatter myself I am.

CAROLINE.

No, it doesn't. It means accepting the inevitable with elegance.

DR. CORNISH.

The inevitable is only what a fool has not the wit to avoid.

CAROLINE.

Believe me, when a woman really makes up her mind to marry a man nothing on God's earth can save him.

DR. CORNISH.

No one is more conscious than I of your advantages. I am sure any man would be lucky to get you, but you know I'm very modest. I don't deserve so much happiness.

CAROLINE.

Your diffidence gives you a new charm in my eyes. It shall be the object of my life to prove you mistaken.

DR. CORNISH.

I have too much affection for you to consent for an instant to your wasting your efforts on so unworthy an object.

CAROLINE.

Ah, then you have an affection for me.

DR. CORNISH.

A purely medical affection, if I may so put it.

CAROLINE.

Good heavens, it sounds like mumps.

DR. CORNISH.

You know, you should have had that prescription made up. I told you you needed soothing.

CAROLINE.

I find *you* soothing. That's one of the reasons why I consent to marry you.

DR. CORNISH.

Don't let us lose sight of the point that I haven't asked you.

CAROLINE.

Well, do.

DR. CORNISH.

You might accept me.

CAROLINE.

I undoubtedly should.

DR. CORNISH.

Then I don't think I'll risk it.

CAROLINE.

You'd better. It will only be embarrassing for both of us if I have to make the proposal.

DR. CORNISH.

I can always say no.

CAROLINE.

Oh, but I wouldn't take a refusal.

DR. CORNISH.

You're a perfect monster of determination.

CAROLINE.

When I think of Robert's great affection for me, I'm prepared for anything.

DR. CORNISH.

I don't wish to seem brutal, but I really must tell you that in my heart of hearts I am completely indifferent to Robert's affection for you.

CAROLINE.

I thought he was a great friend of yours.

DR. CORNISH.

He is.

CAROLINE.

Then you must want to make him happy. I'm sure he'd like you to be my husband.

DR. CORNISH.

You're putting me in a very embarrassing position.

CAROLINE.

I wonder if you know how very pleasant it is to be married.

DR. CORNISH.

I'm sure it's delightful for those who like it.

CAROLINE.

There are a hundred ways in which a woman can make a man comfortable.

DR. CORNISH.

There are a thousand and one in which she can do the reverse.

CAROLINE.

I always think there's something rather cold and cheerless about a house that lacks a woman's touch.

DR. CORNISH.

How true! I feel quite sure that if you put that before Robert as persuasively as you have before me he will realize how very lucky he is to be going to marry you.

CAROLINE.

Pray, don't be flippant. *You* are going to marry me.

DR. CORNISH.

No.

CAROLINE.

Yes.

DR. CORNISH.

[*With a smile.*] After all, you can't force me.

CAROLINE.

I can make life intolerable to you unless you do.

DR. CORNISH.

You're a very dangerous woman.

CAROLINE.

But you're a very brave man.

DR. CORNISH.

I can't help thinking that Robert would look upon it as a very unfriendly action on my part.

CAROLINE.

Only for a moment. He'd soon realize that 'we'd only had his happiness in view.

DR. CORNISH.

If you find a husband so essential, why were you so careless as to lose your last?

CAROLINE.

I never knew what a useful article it was about a house.

DR. CORNISH.

It doesn't inspire confidence, you know.

CAROLINE.

I'll be more careful with you.

DR. CORNISH.

[*With a chuckle.*] It would be an awful sell for him, wouldn't it?

CAROLINE.

Can't you see his face when you tell him?

DR. CORNISH.

[*Considering her.*] Of course, you're a very charming woman.

CAROLINE.

People have thought so.

DR. CORNISH.

[*Impulsively.*] I think Robert's a fool. He should never have hesitated.

CAROLINE.

He shouldn't have, should he?

DR. CORNISH.

It would serve him jolly well right if someone stepped over his head and seized the opportunity that he hadn't the courage to take.

CAROLINE.

I'd rather you spoke of me as a prize than as an opportunity. That suggests a remnant at a sale.

[*He gives her a long look. There is a twinkle in his eye.*]

DR. CORNISH.

Caroline, will you be my wife?

CAROLINE.

I? [*For a moment she is surprised, but she quickly recovers herself.*] I hardly know what to say to you. This is so unexpected. It never entered my head that you—that you cared for me. [*She takes the plunge with determination.*] Yes, I will be your wife.

DR. CORNISH.

I've always thought it would be very nice to have someone on whom I could experiment with new medicines when they're put on the market.

CAROLINE.

[*Somewhat taken aback.*] Oh! How have you managed up till now?

DR. CORNISH.

[*Bluntdly.*] I've generally tried them on the maids, but they have no interest in science; they will give me their notice. But, of course, you couldn't do that, could you?

CAROLINE.

I haven't got a very great interest in science myself.

DR. CORNISH.

Oh, but it'll come. I'm sure you won't hesitate at a trifling inconvenience when you realize how much it means to me.

CAROLINE.

[*Pursing her lips.*] If there are any other duties which you expect of me, I hope you'll tell me at once.

DR. CORNISH.

I don't know that there are. Of course, you'll have to lead a very retired life. People don't much like meeting their doctor's wife; they're always afraid she knows too much about their insides. In fact, the most desirable thing is that she should be a confirmed invalid.

CAROLINE.

I imagine that would follow almost automatically on a course of medicines whose properties you were entirely unfamiliar with.

DR. CORNISH.

That is one of those admirable contrivances which confirm one in the belief that the world is not a matter of pure chance.

CAROLINE.

[*Shaking off the doubts which his remarks have suggested.*] Oh, well, I don't care. When I think of the faces they'll all make when you tell them the news, everything is worth while.

DR. CORNISH.

I see the joke from your point of view much more than from mine.

CAROLINE.

Isabella will think it very touching and she'll probably kiss you.

DR. CORNISH.

She's a very pretty young woman.

CAROLINE.

Maude will think I've behaved abominably, and she'll tell me so with gusto. But Robert—I wonder what Robert will look like. I'm going to telephone to Isabella. [*She touches the bell.*] They've spent a happy day here to please themselves. Now it's my turn.

DR. CORNISH.

Are you expecting Robert?

CAROLINE.

Yes. Dear Robert. He went to buy me a ring. [COOPER *comes in.*] Cooper, ring up Mrs. Trench and ask her to come round at once. I have something very important to tell her.

COOPER.

Very good, ma'am.

[*Exit.*]

CAROLINE.

Now listen. Maude, if I know her, is on her way to this house. I'm only surprised that she hasn't

come already. Robert can't be long. Then there's Isabella. You mustn't say a word till they're all here. Then——

DR. CORNISH.

Yes, what then?

CAROLINE.

Then you'll stand here and you'll get into an appropriate attitude. You'll try and look merry and bright, won't you?

DR. CORNISH.

Oh, d'you think so? I should have thought an air of stern resolution would be more to the point.

CAROLINE.

Remember that you've loved me in secret for seven years.

DR. CORNISH.

It's the seven which seems to me a little difficult to indicate on my face.

CAROLINE.

Then you'll say to them: My dear friends, I have a communication to impart which will be in the nature of a surprise to all of you. Caroline has consented to be my wife. And then we'll see what happens.

DR. CORNISH.

I see.

CAROLINE.

What d'you think will happen?

[*Enter COOPER, followed by MISS FULTON.*]

COOPER.

Miss Fulton.

[*Exit.*]

MAUDE.

Well, Caroline. Oh, how do you do again, Dr. Cornish? [*To CAROLINE.*] Is anything the matter with you?

CAROLINE.

[*Mysteriously.*] No. Dr. Cornish hasn't come to see me about my health.

DR. CORNISH.

No.

MAUDE.

Where is Robert?

CAROLINE.

He's gone out.

MAUDE.

You haven't sent him away?

CAROLINE.

He did what you wished, Maude.

MAUDE.

[*With triumph.*] Ah. I knew it only needed a little firmness and everything could be put right.

CAROLINE.

Maude, something has happened which puts an entirely different complexion on things.

MAUDE.

[*Suddenly suspicious.*] What on earth do you mean? Dr. Cornish!

DR. CORNISH.

All in good time, my dear lady.

MAUDE.

Isn't everything all right?

CAROLINE.

It depends on what you mean by all right.

MAUDE.

My dear . . .

CAROLINE.

You must wait till Robert comes. It's only fair that nobody should know before he does. [*To* DR. CORNISH.] Don't you agree with me?

DR. CORNISH.

Perfectly.

MAUDE.

By the way, have you had an answer to the telegram you sent to Nairobi?

CAROLINE.

No, I haven't yet.

[COOPER comes in to announce ROBERT OLDHAM and then goes out.]

COOPER.

Mr. Oldham !

CAROLINE.

[*Cordially.*] Ah, Robert, I've been wondering what had happened to you.

ROBERT.

Good God, there's Maude.

CAROLINE.

And Dr. Cornish.

ROBERT.

Hulloa ! I've not seen you for a long time. What d'you think of the news ?

CAROLINE.

Dr. Cornish has some news, too, Robert.

MAUDE.

If I am not told it soon I shall have an attack of hysterics.

ROBERT.

I've seen Petersen, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

You shall tell me what he said later.

ROBERT.

You're very strange, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

You must have a moment's patience.

MAUDE.

Why ?

CAROLINE.

I want Isabella to be here. She takes such an interest in me I feel that she, too, should know something that makes so great a difference to my future.

ROBERT.

[*Somewhat irritably.*] I don't understand. I hate mysteries.

DR. CORNISH.

I have something to tell you which is very important, but Mrs. Ashley does not wish me to break it to you till all her friends are gathered round her.

CAROLINE.

Exactly.

MAUDE.

I like mysteries, but I hate suspense.

ROBERT.

Oh, Cornish, has Caroline told you what we've decided on ?

DR. CORNISH.

She's told me that you wish to marry her.

ROBERT.

You know I've been devoted to her for years.

CAROLINE.

We need not go into that now, Robert.

MAUDE.

I'm beginning to grow very uneasy.

[*Enter COOPER.*]

COOPER.

Mrs. Trench and Mr. Cunningham.

[*They enter.*]

CAROLINE.

At last.

ISABELLA.

What is the matter, Caroline? Fortunately Rex was at my door. He was just going to take me for a drive in the Park.

CAROLINE.

His two-seater is so useful, isn't it?

ISABELLA.

So I made him bring me here at once. Has anything happened? Your message has made me dreadfully anxious.

REX.

We're both dreadfully anxious, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

What is it, Cooper?

COOPER.

There's a gentleman called. He says he has an appointment with you, ma'am.

CAROLINE.

[*Taking the card.*] Gaskell and Birch. Oh, I know; they're the house agents.

ROBERT.

Of course. You rang them up just before I left you. Cooper can take him round the house.

CAROLINE.

Thank the gentleman for coming, Cooper, and say I'm sorry to have troubled him. I shan't be wanting to let my house just yet after all.

ROBERT.

[*Astounded.*] Caroline!

CAROLINE.

That's all, Cooper.

COOPER.

Very good, ma'am.

[*Exit.*]

ROBERT.

What is the meaning of this? You agreed that you would get rid of your house. If you've changed your mind, Caroline . . .

CAROLINE.

Wait one moment, Robert. Now, dear Doctor, I think the time has arrived. Will you tell them—everything?

DR. CORNISH.

[*Stepping forward.*] Yes. My dear friends, I have a communication to impart which will be in the nature of a surprise to all of you.

ISABELLA.

I can simply hear my heart beating.

DR. CORNISH.

[*Looking stealthily at CAROLINE.*] Stephen Ashley walked out of this room exactly five minutes ago.

ALL.

What?

[*No one is more taken aback than CAROLINE.*

DR. CORNISH *watches her with extreme, but inward, entertainment.*]

DR. CORNISH.

I have seen him with my own eyes. He's no more dead than I am.

REX.

My hat!

ISABELLA.

I don't understand. Caroline !

CAROLINE.

No one can be more flabbergasted than I.

DR. CORNISH.

It's not the first time his death has been announced. When I came in and found him I was hardly surprised.

CAROLINE.

I don't know if I'm standing on my head or on my heels.

DR. CORNISH.

He can very easily live for twenty years.

CAROLINE.

D'you think he will ?

DR. CORNISH.

If proper care is taken of him.

MAUD.

My poor Caroline, what a disappointment for you.

DR. CORNISH.

You must all of you be very gentle with Caroline.
[To CAROLINE.] I can only offer you my sincerest sympathy.

CAROLINE.

You're not going ?

DR. CORNISH.

[*With a smile.*] I'm going to leave you to deal with the situation as best you can.

CAROLINE.

[*Under her breath.*] You brute!

DR. CORNISH.

If a man of the world is one who can get out of an awkward predicament gracefully. . . . Good-bye.

[*He goes out quickly.*]

ISABELLA.

You're bearing it magnificently.

CAROLINE.

[*Trying not to laugh.*] D'you think so? It's been an awful strain. I've just about reached the end of my strength. I think I'm going to faint.

ISABELLA.

Robert, open the window. You look a perfect wreck.

CAROLINE.

[*Beginning to giggle.*] No, I'm going to have a nerve storm.

MAUDE.

Don't let yourself go, Caroline. Don't let yourself go.

CAROLINE.

[*Gurgling.*] I can't help it.

[*She starts laughing. Her laughter grows louder and louder. They all press round her.*]

ALL.

Caroline, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

It was such a shock !

ISABELLA.

Where are my smelling salts ?

MAUDE.

How stupid of me !

[*The two ladies hurriedly take salts from their bags and put them under CAROLINE'S nose while she helplessly laughs and laughs.*]

MAUDE.

Here are some. Slap her hands.

[*The two men take her hands and slap the palms.*]

ROBERT.

Stop it, Caroline, stop it !

ISABELLA.

Let's send for the doctor.

MAUDE.

What's the good of a doctor ? I know exactly what to do. Slap her feet.

CAROLINE.

I won't have my feet slapped.

MAUDE.

Don't pay any attention to what she says.

[*While the men continue slapping her hands the ladies slap her feet. CAROLINE laughs uproariously. At last she is exhausted.*]

CAROLINE.

Oh, dear !

MAUDE.

Now she's getting better. I knew the best thing was to slap her feet. If that doesn't stop it, then the thing is to wrap her in a rug and roll her up and down the floor.

CAROLINE.

Maude, you cat ! Oh, I'm beginning to feel better.

ROBERT.

After all, one can't be surprised, can one ?

MAUDE.

Good heavens, if my husband suddenly appeared like that I should fall down in a fit.

REX.

I didn't know you had a husband.

MAUDE.

I haven't. That's why it would be such a terrible shock.

ISABELLA.

Now you must tell us everything, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

There's nothing to tell.

MAUDE.

Nonsense. How did he come in?

CAROLINE.

On his feet.

MAUDE.

Don't be silly. What did he do? What did he say? What is he up to? Where is he going?

CAROLINE.

Oh!

[This is a long-drawn sound as she realizes what she is in for and what she must invent.]

ROBERT.

Don't worry her. Hasn't she been through enough already, poor child?

CAROLINE.

How good you are to me, Robert!

MAUDE.

It can't hurt you just to give us the bare facts, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

Sit down, then, and I will tell you all.

[They seat themselves on chairs, two on each side of her, eager for a full account.]

ROBERT.

Now don't excite yourself, Caroline. I beseech you to be calm.

MAUDE.

Hold your tongue, Robert.

CAROLINE.

Well, I was sitting down quite calmly playing a game of patience. Robert had just left me.

ROBERT.

On what an errand !

MAUDE.

I know. You had arranged to be married. I saw it at once in Robert's look. My poor Robert !

ROBERT.

[*Simply.*] I had told Caroline I couldn't live without her. She promised to be mine.

CAROLINE.

He went out to buy a ring. I was wondering if it would be a cabochon.

ROBERT.

[*Gloomily.*] Would you like to see ?

[*He takes out of his pocket a large emerald ring.*]

CAROLINE.

Oh, Robert, what a beauty ! It looks frightfully expensive.

ROBERT.

Oh, a mere song. I wonder if they'll take it back.

CAROLINE.

Don't bother about that, Robert. I will keep it as a memento of our short engagement.

[ROBERT'S *face falls*.]

ISABELLA.

What a charming idea, Caroline!

ROBERT.

[*With a hollow laugh*.] There's no one like Caroline to have charming ideas like that.

MAUDE.

Go on, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

I only wanted a seven to get my patience out. I drew a ten of clubs, a three of spades. I don't believe I shall get it, I said. Suddenly Cooper opened the door and said a gentleman wanted to see me.

ALL.

Yes, yes!

[*They draw their chairs a little closer*.]

CAROLINE.

I thought it was the house agent.

ROBERT.

Of course. You rang him up just before I left.

CAROLINE.

Oh, Robert, I want to tell you that I thought it over. It seemed cruel to make you sell your dear little house. After all, a woman should cleave to her husband. I had made up my mind to get rid of this one, and come and live in yours.

ROBERT.

Caroline, were you ready to do that for me?

THE OTHERS.

Go on, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

I didn't hesitate. I said to Cooper: Show the gentleman up. I went on with my patience. Ah, I said, there's the seven at last! I raised my eyes, and there was my husband standing before me.

ALL.

Oh! . . .

CAROLINE.

[*Dramatically.*] You, I said. Yes, he said. Not dead? I said. No, he said.

MAUDE.

It's the most exciting thing I've ever heard in my life.

ISABELLA.

What did you do then?

CAROLINE.

[*Deliberately.*] I asked him to sit down.

ROBERT.

That was splendid. You always had presence of mind, Caroline. I like that. You asked him to sit down.

CAROLINE.

I wanted to gain time. I was all in a flutter.

MAUDE.

Of course, I think it was monstrous of him to come here at all.

CAROLINE.

He did it in kindness, Maude. He saw the notice in *The Times* this morning, and he thought I might be anxious about him. He said he felt the only thing to do was to come here himself and tell me the announcement was premature.

ISABELLA.

But, then, what is the explanation of it?

CAROLINE.

The explanation? I'm just coming to that.

ROBERT.

Really the papers ought to be more careful!

MAUDE.

Go on, Caroline; we're simply hanging on your words.

CAROLINE.

I'm not sure, but I think I'm going to have another nerve storm.

MAUDE.

Get the hearthrug, Rex. That'll just do to roll her up in.

CAROLINE.

No, don't bother. I think it's going off. The explanation is perfectly simple. Just give me a moment to collect my thoughts. You know, I'm quite dazed after all I've gone through to-day.

ISABELLA.

Take your time, dearest.

CAROLINE.

Well, I may as well confess to you now that poor Stephen has always been very wild. It appears that he was in with a man called Brown, and they'd been connected in some deal or other which I'm afraid was dreadfully shady. Of course, I didn't ask for details. It's all rather vague in my mind.

ROBERT.

That's only natural.

MAUDE.

Oh, be quiet, Robert.

CAROLINE.

They had a row, and Brown bolted with all Stephen's belongings, his papers, his kit, everything. Then I don't know exactly what happened. Brown

seems to have been taken suddenly ill. When he was brought to the hospital he was unconscious. They found Stephen's papers on him and naturally concluded he was Stephen.

MAUDE.

I see it all. It's a thing that might happen to anybody.

CAROLINE.

[*Eagerly.*] Yes, isn't it? Stephen saw the announcement in this morning's *Times*. He grasped the whole situation. I don't think he's sorry the authorities in East Africa should believe him dead. He's made up his mind to go to Texas. Stephen Ashley is dead to everyone but me.

MAUDE.

At all events, you've seen him for the last time, Caroline. That's something to be thankful for.

CAROLINE.

I suppose so.

ROBERT.

What do you mean by that? Aren't you sure of it?

CAROLINE.

There's one other thing I must tell you. I hardly know how to say it. He still loves me.

REX.

Caroline.

CAROLINE.

He asked me to go to Texas.

ALL.

You !

CAROLINE.

He's going to start a new life. He said I should give him confidence in himself. He implored me to go with him.

ROBERT.

But of course you refused, Caroline ?

CAROLINE.

I was obliged to refuse. Then he said that I would be an inspiration to him. He would do everything in the world to make amends for the past. He would make himself a new man, and then he would come back for me.

ISABELLA.

It's really very beautiful.

ROBERT.

And where do I come in ?

CAROLINE.

I can never marry you, Robert.

ROBERT.

Caroline, you fill me with anguish. . . . I must be alone for a moment. I don't want to be unmanly.

[He gets up and walks slowly to the window. He stands there struggling with his emotion. REX is sunk in blank wretchedness.]

MAUDE.

Well, Isabella, we did all *we* could. We at all events have nothing to reproach ourselves with.

ISABELLA.

Poor Robert. My heart bleeds for him. There's something singularly awe-inspiring in the sight of a strong man wrestling with his emotion.

MAUDE.

It's not often that I confess myself beaten, but this time I really am at a loss. Good-bye, Caroline. I'll ring up this evening to see how you are.

CAROLINE.

Good-bye, dearest. I can never thank you enough for all you've done for me to-day.

[*They kiss, and MISS FULTON goes out.*]

ISABELLA.

I must leave you too, Caroline, but I'd just like to say a word or two to Robert before I go. It's just at these times that a man values a woman's sympathy.

CAROLINE.

Oh, do, Isabella. I know what a heart you have. [ISABELLA goes up to ROBERT and puts her hand gently on his arm. He heaves a sigh and gently puts her hand. She looks up at him softly. They step out on to the balcony. CAROLINE and REX have watched the little comedy.] At it again. Dear Isabella, she's so sympathetic.

REX.

[*Gloomily.*] If there's anyone in want of sympathy now it's me.

CAROLINE.

Is anything the matter ?

REX.

Can *you* ask me that ? Oh, Caroline, everything is the matter. I love you.

CAROLINE.

Oh, you mustn't say that to me now, Rex—so loud.

REX.

This changes everything.

CAROLINE.

I suppose it does. I never thought of it.

REX.

You never thought of me at all. Oh, Caroline, you must be quite heartless. Has anyone ever loved you as unselfishly as I have ?

CAROLINE.

Now that I have one man with a marriage certificate in his hand, so to speak, and another with a special licence in his pocket, it does make a difference, doesn't it ?

REX.

My position is absolutely intolerable.

CAROLINE.

[*With a sigh of self-satisfaction.*] I am the unattainable.

REX.

[*Absorbed in himself.*] Oh, how I'm going to suffer. I'm going to endure absolute agonies.

CAROLINE.

[*In exactly the same condition.*] I am young. I am beautiful. I am desired.

REX.

You're not paying any attention to me. I adore you, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

[*Looking away modestly.*] I can never love you, Rex.

REX.

Are you quite, quite sure of that, Caroline?

CAROLINE.

Quite, quite.

REX.

[*With a sigh of satisfaction.*] My heart's never been so broken as this time. It'll take me all my life to piece it together again. You do believe in my love now, don't you?

CAROLINE.

Oh, yes. A woman has such quick intuition. I know that you love me.

REX.

I shall pass sleepless night after sleepless night.

CAROLINE.

I can hardly bear to think of it.

REX.

And there's nothing you can do, is there?

CAROLINE.

Nothing.

REX.

[*With immense enjoyment.*] I'm simply going to have a rotten time.

CAROLINE.

It's wonderful to be capable of such love.

REX.

Yes, I'm like that. I never knew anyone who could suffer as I can.

CAROLINE.

It's only those who can who are worthy of a great love.

REX.

Do you think it would be unmanly of me to cry?

CAROLINE.

I shouldn't like you to do it here.

REX.

Oh, no. I'll keep a stiff upper lip as long as I'm with you. But to-morrow morning I shouldn't wonder at all if my pillow was sopping.

CAROLINE.

Have you a waterproof sheet?

REX.

Yes. I never travel without one.

CAROLINE.

[*Giving him her hand.*] I wish you could marry some nice pure young English girl.

REX.

With a bit of money? I can never forget you, Caroline. Why are you giving me your hand?

CAROLINE.

[*With emotion.*] I thought you were going away.

REX.

I can't leave you like this. We must talk this over thoroughly. I've got masses of things I want to say to you.

CAROLINE.

Not now, Rex. I'm shattered by all this emotion.

REX.

Well, when can I see you again?

CAROLINE.

I'm afraid I'm dreadfully full up this week.

REX.

Caroline, have pity on me.

CAROLINE.

Of course, if you hadn't been engaged to-night you might have come and dined here.

REX.

But I'm not engaged to-night.

CAROLINE.

I thought you were dining with Isabella.

REX.

I can dine with Isabella any night.

CAROLINE.

Won't she be hurt if you throw her over?

REX.

To tell you the truth, Caroline, I don't think I'm going to get on with Isabella.

CAROLINE.

D'you find her too . . . too melting?

REX.

My dear Caroline, she's like butter on a hot day. No, no, too many tears have been wept on that bosom ; I'm not going to bedew it with mine.

CAROLINE.

In that case dinner at eight sharp.

REX.

I'll come, Caroline . . . if nothing unfortunate has happened to me before then.

CAROLINE.

Oh, be careful, I've got quite a nice little dinner.

REX.

[*Gloomily.*] What have you got?

CAROLINE.

I've got some fresh caviare. It's just arrived from Russia.

REX.

I could eat nothing. In happier moments I don't deny that I like caviare.

CAROLINE.

And I've got a little turtle soup.

REX.

I might try to swallow a little turtle soup.

CAROLINE.

[*Softly.*] Don't let anything happen before dinner.

REX.

I suppose you haven't got grilled salmon?

CAROLINE.

No, turbot.

REX.

[*Desperately.*] Everything goes against me.

CAROLINE.

On the other hand, I've got some dear little baby chickens just out of their shells. It seems almost unkind to eat them when so young.

REX.

I dare say they've been saved a lot of unhappiness.

CAROLINE.

And then nothing but a strawberry ice.

REX.

I shouldn't wonder if I could eat the ice.

CAROLINE.

Then you'll come?

REX.

[*With a deep sigh.*] If it'll give you any pleasure.
A dinner-jacket or a white tie?

CAROLINE.

A dinner-jacket.

REX.

All right. Good-bye. I . . . I can't say good-bye to the others. I'm in such a fearful state of agitation.

[*Exit. ISABELLA hears the door close and comes back into the room.*]

ISABELLA.

Has Rex gone? He was going to drive me home.

CAROLINE.

How stupid of him! I suppose he forgot.

ISABELLA.

I'll get a taxi. I want to leave you alone with Robert. He's dreadfully upset, Caroline.

CAROLINE.

Is he?

ISABELLA.

I've been trying to console him a little.

CAROLINE.

Yes, I saw you.

ISABELLA.

Be very gentle with him, Caroline. Be tender.

CAROLINE.

I shall never find the exquisite things to say to him that you would, Isabella.

ISABELLA.

He says I have a wonderful gift of sympathy.

CAROLINE.

[*With a sigh.*] I wonder if you'd come and dine with me to-night?

ISABELLA.

I'm afraid I've asked Rex.

CAROLINE.

I'm sure he doesn't need you half as much as I do.

ISABELLA.

Oh, if you need me, Caroline, of course I'll come. Somehow I felt you'd want me to-night. We'll have a good cry together, darling.

CAROLINE.

Oh, that will be nice.

ISABELLA.

Good-bye till then, dearest; I suppose I'd better put on a tea-gown.

CAROLINE.

Oh, yes, that'll be very suitable. Dinner at eight sharp.

ISABELLA.

Only an egg for me, Caroline.

[*She goes out.* ROBERT hears her last word as he comes into the room.]

ROBERT.

When is she going to eat an egg?

CAROLINE.

For dinner.

ROBERT.

How disgusting! Where?

CAROLINE.

Here.

ROBERT.

You don't mean to say you've invited her to dinner?

CAROLINE.

Yes.

ROBERT.

Why on earth have you done that?

CAROLINE.

You asked me to.

ROBERT.

I never did anything of the sort. Really, Caroline, you are too inconsiderate.

CAROLINE.

I thought you wanted to play bridge afterwards.

ROBERT.

Bridge! You might have known that this evening of all others I'd want to be alone with you. Upon my word, it's too callous!

CAROLINE.

Oh, Robert!

ROBERT.

I'm staggering under the bitterest disappointment of my life. I'm utterly miserable. The only thing that consoled me was the thought of having a quiet evening alone with you so that we could have a good talk. And you bring that cackling woman along.

CAROLINE.

I thought you were so fond of her.

ROBERT.

You know perfectly well that for ten years I've been supremely indifferent to every woman in the world but you.

CAROLINE.

[*She begins to understand.*] Oh! [*With a smile.*]
It's very nice of you to say so, dear Robert.

ROBERT.

Caroline, I don't know how I'm going to bear it. I feel as if the earth were tottering under my feet.

CAROLINE.

You must have patience, Robert.

ROBERT.

Patience! I've had patience for ten years. And now just when the reward was put into my hands it's snatched away.

CAROLINE.

You know, I expected you to be rather relieved at hearing that my husband was alive.

ROBERT.

I? My dear Caroline, have you gone out of your mind?

CAROLINE.

You weren't so very anxious to marry me this morning.

ROBERT.

Nonsense, Caroline. You know very well that I've always been anxious to marry you.

CAROLINE.

You dissembled with some skill, Robert.

ROBERT.

I will be perfectly frank with you, Caroline. At the first moment I was a little startled. It meant beginning a new life and the change of all my habits. But that was only a natural hesitation. When you accepted me I *knew* I'd achieved the dearest wish of my heart. Caroline, I've never wanted to marry you as much as I do now.

CAROLINE.

Don't you think I'm a little old to marry?

ROBERT.

You?

CAROLINE.

It has occurred to me sometimes that I'm not quite so young as I was. A spiteful person might say I was almost middle-aged!

ROBERT.

What nonsense! Why, you haven't reached your prime yet.

CAROLINE.

Are you sure you see no change in me?

ROBERT.

None. This morning I thought perhaps you were almost looking your age. But now, I don't know what's happened to you, you look radiant. You've not been making up, have you?

CAROLINE.

Oh, no, I never do that.

ROBERT.

You look eighteen. You're ravishing. If I hadn't been madly in love with you for ten years I should fall in love with you this afternoon.

CAROLINE.

It makes me feel so happy to hear you say that.

ROBERT.

Oh, it's cruel that this man should come back just when we'd fixed everything up. I want to be married to you, Caroline. Why shouldn't we take the matter in our own hands and force the wretched fellow to divorce you?

CAROLINE.

We've discussed that so often and we've decided it was impossible. We're slaves of our past, our circumstances, and our surroundings. It can't be done, Robert.

ROBERT.

D'you mean to say we must go on like this?

CAROLINE.

Are you sure we're not happier as we are? We can keep our ideals in one another. Who knows what painful surprises marriage might bring us? You might find me flirtatious and exacting. I might discover you were selfish and comfort-loving.

ROBERT.

Hang it all, Caroline, I'm not selfish. I have a passion for self-sacrifice.

CAROLINE.

Nothing is so pleasant as to think of the sacrifices that one will never have to make.

ROBERT.

Caroline, you don't know how I love you.

CAROLINE.

Our love has lasted very long, Robert. Don't you think a closer connection might give it all sorts of little rubs and wrenches till there was nothing of it left? One may reasonably ask one thing of life, that it shouldn't tear rents in the illusions it creates. Illusion may be the foundation of all our happiness, but even if it is illusion let us keep it.

ROBERT.

You may talk, but that man can't live for ever.

CAROLINE.

He has a wonderful physique.

ROBERT.

Next time he dies, I shall seize you by the hair of your head and drag you to the altar.

CAROLINE.

He'll see us both out. I'm conscious that he lives now with a new and different life. It may be that he's necessary for our happiness. So, I cannot fade and you will ever love. My husband has been found. [*With immense decision.*] And now, Robert, he will never die.

ROBERT.

Caroline, I adore you.

[*He clasps her in his arms.*]

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